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SOME DIFFERING CONCEPTIONS OF THE HEROINE  
IN SELECTED MID-VICTORIAN NOVELS

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## Abstract

In their studies of the social and moral conventions which appear to have governed Victorian attitudes to women, some present-day critics have made various statements and broad generalizations about such matters. For example, Dr. William Acton's medical opinions are frequently cited. Coventry Patmore's "Angel" is constantly referred to in the arguments of those who emphasize the way in which they believe all Victorians saw women as idealistically angelic and saintly, whereas "Walter's" My Secret Life and other stock anecdotes about Victorian sex-life and its underworld pornography, are frequently quoted in favour of a very different, but also somewhat extreme view. What this shows is, rather, that if one's evidence is selected it can be made to support almost any view; and it is, in fact, hard to accept that a case can be made out for any really effective generalization about women in Victorian literature.

Not less damaging and misleading are such conventional images of the fallen woman as "an ostracized outcast" and of the "passionate" woman as someone baffling and repellent. The conventionality often lies in the writer's views as well as in the literature he is criticizing. This is seen, to some extent, in the image of the ostracized outcast in such novels of the forties as Dickens's Oliver Twist (1838) and Mrs Gaskell's Mary Barton (1848). Yet, later in the fifties, we find that society's treatment of its fallen women differed considerably and the outcast of the previous decades became the repentant Magdalen, there was apparently

great hope of her redemption, and consequently novelists began to take different attitudes towards this subject as can be seen in such tales or novels as David Copperfield (1850) and Mrs Gaskell's Lizzie Leigh (1850) and Ruth (1853). Society wavered between forgiveness and partial reclamation. Then, a decade later, the fallen woman was forgiven, taken back into society and to some extent allowed to return to normal life; and this can be seen in novels such as Anthony Trollope's The Vicar of Bullhampton (1871) and Wilkie Collins's The New Magdalen (1873) and The Fallen Leaves (1879).

The image of the "passionate" woman also underwent a similar development from felt yet unpronounced sympathy in David Copperfield to an overt fascination in Wilkie Collins's Armadale (1866) and taken to an expression of sympathy and admiration in Trollope's The Way We Live Now (1875).

We must all see that these images cannot be taken as an innocent pictorial guide to reality, nor do they allow easy generalizations about "the Victorians". If we seek evidence about the period from fiction, novels must be read with insight and understanding and common sense. The frailties of such critics must alert us to the need for guarding against making our own mis-readings.

## CHAPTER I

## The Image of The Ideal Woman

## (i)

The enormous number of studies and critical assessments written about the Victorians often includes quite contradictory and paradoxical ideas which may well confuse us. They blur the picture in our minds so that it becomes difficult for us to believe in the absolute truth of these studies or to trust any critical point of view unreservedly. In fact it is an important paradox to grasp that this is what they ought to do. There can be no absolute truth about any such period as the Victorian. Yet I have to write about the Victorians as a student of today; and, not only that, I have to write as someone who belongs to quite a different culture not only from that of Victorian Britain but from contemporary Britain. It seems to me not unreasonable, therefore, to begin by offering an account of what a number of introductory works on the period give by way of generalization. Only then can I proceed to question what they say, both in its very nature and by comparing their author's comments with what we actually find on reading some of the works of the period.

No doubt these writers themselves face a similar problem; and, in fact, they seek to find general terms and try to stamp the whole period with their broad generalizations, ignoring or forgetting aspects which do not fall within their chosen categories. Especially is this so when they generalize about women. Yet whatever the reality may have been, we

notice that most of them tend to show only one side of the picture. They usually show women as saintly and angelic. For though some studies have been written from the other side, we find the wings of Patmore's angel are still hovering over literary criticism. If we look at some examples, it is possible to piece them together and make a mosaic portrait of the type.

Yet before doing so, both I and these critics face an initial difficulty. It is not that it is impossible to generalize properly about the period, it is that we all find it difficult to avoid shifting our point of view. Walter Houghton, at least, is clear in that his title states directly that he is going to write about The Victorian Frame of Mind; but one is not always clear, in reading other writers, which Victorians they are writing about. Are they writing about the average reader; are they speaking of the imagined world in the book she is holding in her hand; or do they have in mind the world outside her drawing-room window? This is something we shall need to return to, for we are likely to find that it causes some difficulty.

If we turn to a study of Victorian Wives for example, by Katherine Moore, we find her saying that women:

throughout the centuries had, of course, filled a subordinate position in society and, except for a short period after the Renaissance, had been denied anything like a good all-round education; but before the Industrial Revolution they had at least to become mistresses of household crafts and had been important in their own sphere.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Katherine Moore, Victorian Wives (London, 1974), p. xiv.  
All subsequent references to the book appear in the text.



In drawing her own image of the Victorian wife she also says that:

The pattern of behaviour to which the early and mid-Victorian wife was expected to conform was too often that of a slave among the working classes and in the upper and middle classes of a useless doll (pp.xiii-xiv).

In everything else, Katherine Moore informs us, she had to hold herself in subjection to her husband, and that if she should be fortunate enough to have been given any kind of education, then, the ultimate end of it was to "enable her to sympathize in her husband's pleasure, and in those of his best friends"(p.xix). So, a woman, according to this account, was expected to develop mainly in order to meet Man's demands. She might practise piety, but need not bother with theology; and the whole attitude, she says, came from the fact that women were always viewed as angels, and "angels, of course, do not have moods nor lusts of the flesh"(p.5).

Katherine Moore finds that "the qualities in women most praised by Coventry Patmore are those which emphasise difference and inequality between the sexes"(p.8). She attacks Patmore's poem which she says exalts "purity which is based upon ignorance" and which calls for the "virginal quality" to "survive marriage"(p.8). She even considers that this attitude was widely shared and that it was one of the reasons which caused women's suffering at the time. She even says that "many a Victorian wife may have suffered, though for the most part unconsciously, from the immense popularity of The Angel in The House"(p.12).

There is something rather strange in generalizing about "the Victorians" on the basis of a reading of this particular poem; and it may well be that the practice of doing so only began with Walter Houghton's book. Yet we can accept this, and go on to see what is said about it. For a close examination of Patmore's poem will certainly show us that what Katherine Moore says about it is far from being true.

Patmore sees his angel as the inspiration of a passion. Of course, this is a sexual passion; and it would be peculiar if we felt that we had to add "even though" applied to someone's wife! Patmore's poem glorifies married love as fervently as the romantics glorified chivalrous love. His love is that, which idealizes and worships the wife, and even sees her as an angel:

And, when we knelt, she seemed to me  
An angel teaching me to pray.<sup>1</sup>

Love of a good woman does not only purify the whole nature, but uplifts and protects man against what can "only be called lust or shame".<sup>2</sup> In her love he obtains the love of God:

I loved her in the name of God  
And for the ray she was of Him;  
... Him loved I most,  
But her I loved most sensibly.<sup>3</sup>

There appears to be an unthinking impression that Patmore is sexless because of the angelic image, but this is far

1. Coventry Patmore, "The Angel in The House", in The Poems of Coventry Patmore, ed. Fredrick Page (London, 1949), p.122.
2. Walter Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870 (London, 1978), p.378.
3. Patmore, ed. Page, p.121.

from being so. The relatively decorous reader, in fact, appears to have been expected to feel some of the thrill of the paradox that a human and loved wife might be seen as in some ways like an angel; and we can also find this brought out in Rossetti's famous poem, "The Blessed Damozel", written as early as 1847. The excitement of the poem comes out in the way that (as Rossetti said) he wished to "give utterance to yearning of the loved one in heaven"<sup>1</sup>:

And still she bowed herself and stooped  
Out of the circling charm;  
Until her bosom must have made  
The bar she leaned on warm,  
And the lilies lay as if asleep  
Along her bended arm.<sup>2</sup>

The point made is that the beloved angel is not ethereal and sexless, but "warm" and yearning. But it seems as if to some readers, The Angel in The House has itself become a conventional symbol for sexless idealism of womanhood. Yet perhaps only the Victorians, one might say, were passionate enough to have broken through the boundaries of convention so that they found even an angel warm and sexually feminine, and a wife the subject of an abiding passion.

It is rather absurd to attribute the suffering of many a Victorian wife to the vast popularity of a certain book or a poem. Though the poem was popular, we can hardly believe that it could have influenced married life or changed it. At the same time, I would like to argue that

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1. W.M. Rossetti, "The Blessed Damozel" in The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle, ed. Cecil J. Lang (Chicago & London, 1975), p.500.

2. The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle, p.2.

Patmore was not alone in writing a highly romantic but sexually-charged view of womanhood with a sense of religion. We can find this, for example, in Charles Kingsley who (as Houghton says) expressed similar ideas, though Patmore put them with "more delicacy"<sup>1</sup>; and it might well be possible to show that this was much more widespread both in life and literature.

To turn to another example, John Reed in his study of Victorian Conventions, finds that "presenting the good woman as a domestic saint was a favourite stylization in Victorian literature".<sup>2</sup> He also finds that "to the Victorian mind, an independent woman challenged moral and social assumptions which Victorians considered essential to a stable society"(p.36). Women were persuaded to view themselves as frail beings who needed the protection of males. They were lovable in their weakness and "wonderfully angelic and superior to men for giving up their lives to male happiness"(pp.37-38).

In portraying women as self-sacrificing, Reed makes a slight variation on the picture of the angel portrayed by Katherine Moore. According to him "the typical virtuous heroine of the Victorian novel is a softened version of Griselde—rewarded for exploitation by being venerated as a saint"(p.37).

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1. Houghton, p.377.

2. John R. Reed, Victorian Conventions (Ohio, 1975), p.37.  
All subsequent references to the book appear in the text.

Griselda, no doubt, was a conventional figure often referred to in Victorian literature, and the association of the "long-suffering wife with Griselda was a familiar one from the beginning of the century"(p.41). The original Griselda, who gave the proverbial name to the submissive type, is now chiefly known through Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale" and Boccaccio's Decameron; and she is clearly the archetypal yielding and obedient woman of all ages.

We may ask whether these conventions and conventional types are distinctly Victorian? For, as we have seen, the Griselda type goes back to the middle ages. Then, does it not occur to us that if this picture of a woman was held up in books as desirable, that real women must have often been very unlike her? No doubt Chaucer himself conveys this. A "type" in literature corresponds both to something in actuality and its opposite; and it would not be admired if men could find the type easily in life. Such idealized types, too, only occur in certain kinds of literature, such as the romantic novel. When women are seen from the comic point of view, what is funny about them may be that they are entirely helpless, as Dora Spenlow when we first meet her, or her friend Julia Mills. But womanhood, in the eyes of the comic writer, is shrewish, fierce, self-reliant, even embattled, and more than a match for men.

When we turn to Jenni Calder's Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction, we find that her colours are dark and so is her whole picture of the Victorian woman. If Katherine Moore believes that the Victorian woman was regarded as an

angel, and Reed also finds her often seen<sup>as</sup> a domestic angel, Jenni Calder finds that women were "simultaneously the supporting pillars and the helpless parasites of society"<sup>1</sup>. As for men, she says that "the assumption in many eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century novels is that men are predators"(p.16).

In many ways her book is an intelligent and perceptive study of women as seen in Victorian fiction. It is far from being extreme; and, even her generalizations are often acceptable. She explains, for example, that "the Victorian novel may be said to be about men and women, but particularly women, seeking protection and fulfilment"(p.15). Her view is that young ladies were brought up under severe restrictions and freedom was largely illusory. She says, apparently of the early Victorians:

Restriction was an ill education for liberty, and most of them passed straight from childhood to the responsibilities of matronhood without any chance of testing their strength as young women, except in the marriage market (p.20).

Yet Jenni Calder's discussion is far from being entirely acceptable. She takes public statements as accurate expressions of Victorian women in general. Her images of the male "predator" and the female "parasite" are tainted and damaging. The lack of real moderation makes her picture of the Victorian women gloomy and unbelievable. If we

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1. Jenni Calder, Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction (London, 1976), p.13. All references to the book appear in the text.

cared to compare what she says with what H. Taine writes, for instance, in his Notes on England (of about the 1860s), then we might find a different picture. Speaking about young girls he says "in England they are much more independent even in London, each of them may go out alone, or at least with her sister"<sup>1</sup>. In another place of his book he writes:

I can bear the testimony of my eyes to the great freedom which they enjoy; I see many of them in the morning in Hyde Park who have come to take a turn on horseback, without other companion than a groom (p.87).

We can only be sure how women are being treated by the novelists if we have some conception of what their position was in real life: something that seems to be beyond most casual literary critics.

When we turn to such writers observation on sex, we find that some of them appear to take rather extraordinary attitudes, and their views in this field are extreme. Even Houghton tells us that "in the Victorian home swarming with children sex was a secret"(p.353). It is difficult to judge the truth of his remark. Katherine Moore writes that sex for "ladies" was "completely taboo, not only any enjoyment, but even any knowledge or recognition of it"<sup>2</sup>. This really does seem to be incredible.

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1. Hippolyte Taine, Notes on England, tran. W.F. Rae (London, 1872), p.85. All references to the book appear in the text.

2. Moore, p.xv.

We can accept that almost all feminine conversation on the subject of sex or even childbirth was considered improper and prudishly avoided, although we may wonder even about this. There were many subjects not fit for the ears of a maiden to listen to, or the mind of a girl to dwell on. "At school", Walter Houghton wrote "the knowledge acquired by the boy (most girls, it would seem, knew nothing before their marriage night) came to him in whispers and in a form which confirmed his first impression that sex was something nasty"(p.353). So, we notice that woman, according to these writers, was denied any strong emotions or deep feelings. She was viewed only with the angelic and saintly frame of mother and sister, and Jenni Calder sees the picture manifested in Dickens's works who, she says "saw his good women as daughters, as mothers, as housekeepers, but not as sexual partners"(p.100).

Well, that may be so, if we think of the novels themselves, but it may remind us to distinguish between the author and his novels, or even the romantic author and the comic one. Obviously Dickens had a well-developed sense of humour, but found the subject, for example, of Mrs Gamp the midwife irresistibly funny. He was even amused, in actual life, by the fact that when his Amateur Players were on tour, many of their wives were pregnant, and might even be expected to give birth when travelling on the railway train. His books could be called prudish, but not Dickens himself; and we may be reminded of the curious story recorded in Emerson's journals when Dickens, Forster and Carlyle



assured him that sexuality was strong in Britain and that Dickens would not expect his young son to be a virgin<sup>1</sup>.

To return to the "generalizers": we cannot possibly know what the percentage of Victorian women was who disliked the sexual act, high as we are assured it was; especially bearing in mind that we have just been told that they were forbidden to mention it! We can hardly believe that the Victorian thought of women as quite like this. Even Agnes in David Copperfield, we have to assume, passionately loved David. Their love is not intimately described; but we are expected to believe in it. This delicacy in expression is even, in one sense, highly charged with sex. We all know that Dickens was writing within certain conventions of which Jenni Calder is well aware, and although these conventions did not make sex a "taboo", they limited the way in which it could be referred to in a widely read work of fiction.

We know very well what David Copperfield, for example, really shows us, or in fact tells us. It is about a woman (David's mother) who is drawn by masculine charm to remarry, when everyone thinks and expressly says she is a fool. The love of her son for her, and his jealousy of his stepfather is sexual, as the author is aware. The boy has a romantic love for a little girl, who is later seduced by his friend. We compare her fate to that

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1. Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph (London, 1953), II, 654.

of a woman in the town (Martha) who becomes a prostitute. The same friend has apparently an unspecified relationship, strongly tinged with sexuality, with his mother's companion, Rosa Dartle. David himself is inspired by romantic love for Dora Spenlow, but even that is not unsexual in its curious way. His friend, Traddles, is devoted to his "Sophie", though one must agree that this is hardly described in terms of sexuality. His aunt's life has been determined by her marriage; we see love and affection in the lives of Pegotty and Barkis; and we find passionately felt love in David's union with Agnes. Let us also mention, in passing, the passionate jealousy of Rosa Dartle. Is not the point, therefore, that we do not find sexual relationships defined in terms of the sexual act in this typical Victorian novel, but in human terms, involving love, jealousy, passion, faithfulness, betrayal and fulfilment?

In denying the Victorian heroine the capacity for deriving enjoyment from sex, it may be that these generalizers are often influenced by the writing of Dr. William Acton, a medical writer of that age and the author of The Functions and Disorders of The Reproductive Organs, and some other books in this field. Oddly enough, many people tend to consider his views on sexuality as the "official morality" of the age, and again it has become the fashion to quote from this rather specialized work as if it were a general and accepted authority on the manners of men and women of the whole period. Dr. Acton wrote that he believed that "the majority of women (happily for them) are not very

much troubled with sensual feeling of any kind"<sup>1</sup>. A modest woman, according to him, seldom desired any sexual gratification for herself, and if she submitted to her husband, it is "only to please him, and ... for the desire of maternity"(p.102). He quoted the case of a frigid woman who did not feel any passion whatever, and whose passion for her husband was of a Platonic kind, as the "perfect picture of English wife and mother"(p.103).

If Dr. Acton's ideas about women's sexuality, which were recorded and fairly widespread at that time, are considered in a somewhat less dogmatic, and more reasonable way, they would "not be allowed to pass without being subjected to detailed and exhaustive empirical checking (and, in this case, disproof)"<sup>2</sup>. With the exception of two short and insignificant passages about women, Dr. Acton's book seems to be entirely about men and male sexuality. Even in these two places, where female sexuality is discussed, it is seen only in relation to the male. There is an unconscious absurdity in the way his book has sometimes been used as a general authority on the behaviour of women in the mid-Victorian period.

How it has come about it is difficult to say. Yet it

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1. William Acton, The Functions and Disorders of The Reproductive Organs (London, 1857), p.101. All references to the book appear in the text.
  2. Women, Sexuality, and Social Control, ed. Carol Smart & Barry Smart (London, 1978), p.57.

seems that some writers about Victorian women still imagine that their readers can think only in terms of stereotypes. They suppose that if the ideal woman was a sexless angel, then this must have been apparent even in writing outside fiction; then that there is medical support, and that one author is enough to sustain their wide generalizations. But all that Acton's recent popularity shows is that his evidence is something that certain writers are looking for to support their pre-suppositions.

(ii)

We have so far been looking at some writers who show one side of the picture. If we turn to the other side, we find other authors who try to shed light on various dim corners of Victorian society and in doing so, reflect different views. It may well be difficult to come to a conclusion where they differ, but what both groups of writers show are the elementary difficulties of making generalities. In fact, what they both suggest is that such writers are less interested in telling the truth and more concerned with entertaining.

That might seem a presum<sup>P</sup>tuous or unduly harsh comment to make of the first work I mean to examine, which is Steven Marcus's The Other Victorians. Yet such work can show a wish to entertain intellectually rather than by anecdote. The title is suggestive of its content. Marcus has dedicated his book to the study of sexual and pornographic works of some writers who are mostly anonymous and

previously unheard of.

In dealing with the "otherness" of these Victorians, Marcus hopes that we will gain a greater knowledge and give our understanding of the period a "giant stride forward". According to him:

this otherness was of a specific Victorian kind, a kind that was of interest to the Victorians themselves and that remains of interest to us as we try to understand the past and ourselves in relation to the past.<sup>1</sup>

All the works which Marcus examines are pornographic, and he gives special importance to My Secret Life, one of these works, which he considers "a piece of literature"(p.111).

My Secret Life was a book of eleven volumes written by an anonymous writer of whom we do not know anything but the name he gave himself of "Walter". These eleven volumes contain nothing but Walter's detailed personal accounts of the illicit gratification of his sexual desires from adolescence or early manhood. The book seems to be nothing more than the autobiography of a sexual adventurer who broke all the prohibitions of his society using his inherited wealth and social rank. Domestic servants and poor girls are "fair game" to him, and prostitutes of varying expensiveness are his constant resort. The language of the book is frequently indecent and vulgar, and so is the content whether he is describing his encounter with a fifteen year-

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1. Steven Marcus, The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England (London, 1966), p.xv. All further references to the book appear in the text.

old prostitute, or expressing his fears about the inadequate size of his organ, or telling us about a visit he paid to one of the common houses.

Though these accounts are repulsive and distasteful, yet Steven Marcus finds them "interesting and useful" (p.103). He explains that they "add to and thicken our sense of the Victorian reality" (p.103). Yet we can hardly agree with Marcus that these scenes are either interesting or useful. Indeed we notice that Marcus, consciously or unconsciously, contradicts himself and offers us later in the book a different opinion. Commenting on one of the scenes in which Walter describes his defloration of a young virgin, Marcus says: "The scenes which describe the outcome of these desires are the most brutal and disgusting in the book" (pp.156-57). So Marcus comes to agree that Walter's accounts are repulsive and shocking, and the scenes they describe are brutal and disgusting.

The only merit Marcus attributes to these scenes is that we learn from them "what did not get into the Victorian novel" (p.104).

In an obvious sense, of course, this is true. It was a period when the literate were sensitive about what might be written down, and this is particularly true of the world of fiction. They were also reasonably decorous in the field of journalism, on the stage, and in most walks of public and private life. Indecency and vulgarity were mostly associated with the lowest classes; and, since it was a society in which there was considerable mobility and

insecurity in social ranking, they were particularly looked down upon.

Yet it does not really surprise us to be told that the world of My Secret Life was essentially secret. Such affairs are usually "secret"; even Walter saw them as so; few ages or cultures have regarded them as anything else, at least in literature. In many ways, the Victorian age is probably closer to the cultural norm than the mid-twentieth century. But we have surely always been aware, even from mid-Victorian fiction, that there was another world surrounding the centre of its attention, lying in its shadow. We are even aware of its presence through its absence. It has long been accepted that the idealism of the Victorians arose not only from their aspiration for their heights but their revulsion from the depths.

What My Secret Life does is to reveal in a harsh and direct light what we know already to be there. Perhaps it is true that (for many readers at least) it is very imperfectly realised until it is directly put into words. Yet, generally speaking, "Walter's" accounts reveal little or nothing that we cannot find elsewhere. Even if we were to confine ourselves to Victorian fiction his accounts hardly change our impressions. For impressions are what we are concerned with in each case. Whether we read Oliver Twist from the point view of the Regius Professor at Edinburgh, who saw it as a novel which was dangerously frank<sup>1</sup>, or from that of the author of The Dickens World,

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1. W.E. Aytoun, "Advice to an Intending Serialist", Blackwood Magazine, 60(1846), 590.

who takes the opposite view<sup>1</sup>, we can hardly fail to see that Nancy is a prostitute any more than that Sikes is a thief. Explicitness is not everything. Even Marcus himself does not hold his opinion consistently, since he later admits:

Every student of the period knows, in some sense, that such things were going on, but no one else has ever written about them in this way, and therefore no one else has ever made us really "know" about them (p.124).

It is not surprising that "know" is used in a special sense. If it is meant that we could not know what the reality of the language used was like without the author's using it, then he is possibly correct. If he means that the actuality of the world that "Walter" reveals is very different from the idealised conception of prostitution conveyed by Wilkie Collins in such a work as Fallen Leaves, then we are bound to agree. But only the most naive reader ever doubted it. But in fact we tend to believe that neither "Walter's" accounts in My Secret Life "thicken our knowledge" of the Victorian reality, nor "does Marcus really advance our understanding of nineteenth-century society"<sup>2</sup>.

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1. Humphry House, The Dickens World (Oxford, 1969), pp.215-16.

2. Brian Harrison, "Underneath the Victorians", Victorian Studies, 10(1966-67), 250.



At least Steven Marcus's work had a serious intention, we can reasonably suppose, when it first appeared. Yet the subject of the sex-life of the Victorians has attracted a number of other writers whose primary aim must surely have been entertainment. In certain ways they can even be moderately useful, since their collections of anecdotes give the reader a hazy view of certain aspects of social life, which are obviously only half-historical. Ronald Pearsall's picture of Victorian society is a work of this kind. The colours seem too thick, and there is a noticeable lack of harmony in its parts which makes the whole picture unconvincing. Pearsall's aim appears to be to fill his two books The Worm in The Bud and Public Purity, Private Shame with incidents and stories about Victorian behaviour and beliefs that contradict the image of the Victorians that they themselves most wanted to project. The upper-classes, according to him, "did not give a damn about conventional morality, and pursued their libidinous pleasures with a gusto only tempered by occasional panic"<sup>1</sup>. While the lower classes led a "rabbity sex" life whose morals were "do what you want when you feel like it"<sup>2</sup>.

He is positive and simple in his judgement on the sexual morality of the "Victorians" declaring that, of three

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1. Ronald Pearsall, The Worm in The Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality (London, 1969), p.xi.
  2. The Worm in The Bud, p.xiv.

"classes", two (the workers, and the aristocrats) did not adhere to it. He writes:

There were some who did not worry about respectability, decency, modesty, and the middle-class shibboleths. These were mostly at the top and the bottom of society; the aristocracy ignored the rules, the lower classes did not know about them<sup>1</sup>.

Pearsall tries to show a common ground between the top and the bottom of society. The upper classes were apparently always happier with the poor. They provided the underworld with its clients and kept its inhabitants in business.

The men who made use of underworld prostitutes "were not licentious youngsters or perverts, but respectable married men, who probably loved their wives but wanted a bit of excitement"<sup>2</sup>. The practice of keeping a woman for one's private pleasure flourished, for "it was one of the lordly ambitions to have a quality mistress in one of the elegant West End squares"<sup>3</sup>. The number of the kept women (professional women, who were courtesans) multiplied to such an extent that they formed a class of their own. These men gave their mistresses protection as well as money and gifts, that enabled them to live "a life that was envied by ostensibly more respectable ladies"<sup>4</sup>.

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1. Ronald Pearsall, Public Purity, Private Shame: Victorian Sexual Hypocrisy Exposed (London, 1976), p.10.
  2. Public Purity, Private Shame, p.9.
  3. The Worm in The Bud, p.250.
  4. The Worm in The Bud, p.246.

Pearsall professes to think of Victorian "respectability" as "curtains" that were intermittently "dropped and hoisted" and "people could get all that they wanted in the way of sex provided that they did not make a song and a dance about it"<sup>1</sup>.

It is all somewhat strange, and the author has little new or sensible to say. His books are gatherings of information and anecdotes loosely grouped under their headings. His pages are crammed with information about prostitution already known to us, and some pornographic and spicy writings collected from underworld publications which can be considered good stories rather than good evidences. He makes wide-ranging statements and misleading generalizations which treat whole classes as individuals, and refers to them in individualistic terms as in "the aristocracy ignored the rules, the lower classes did not know about them"<sup>2</sup>. His views about the curtains of respectability which were dropped and hoisted, and the free world of sexuality which he describes is extreme and far from being true. Pearsall simply takes the behaviour of an exceptional few and generalizes it as that of the normal majority of society.

We might ask why he does so apart from wishing to write a book which will attract as many various readers as possible.

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1. The Worm in The Bud, p.xvi.

2. Public Purity, Private Shame, p.10.

That may be the only reason. Yet he also seems to delight in revealing the undecorous view of the Victorians. It never seems to occur to such readers that if Victorian prudery (or idealism) had its cause in a revulsion from the license and harshness of some elements of the age, that an enjoyment in collecting anecdotes about them (and reading them) could only arise at a time when readers were secure, somewhat bored, and without definite aspirations. The contrast between actual Victorians and popular books about them is rarely to the latter's advantage.

These two studies are representative of many more; and perhaps more might be learned about modern attitudes to the Victorians if there were time to give a fuller survey. But it is unlikely that we would learn more about the Victorians themselves.

(iii)

The difference between the two sides of the picture is so great as to make any reader of the previous two sections suspect the truth of both of them. Though each view claims to show Victorian society, and though each side (in one way or another) shows us the social and moral values of the Victorians from certain aspects, the sharp contrast between the two sides makes it impossible for us to accept or agree with either.

Each side claims the truth and provides various anecdotes and information which are partially helpful if we try to

have a panoramic look at society and to come to our own judgement. Let us, therefore, look at both sides objectively, and try to examine their authenticity.

We may well not wish to begin by rejecting the idea that many Victorians did have an ideal image of women as "angelic"; but we can, at least, start by disagreeing with much that Katherine Moore, Jenni Calder, John Reed and Walter Houghton say about it. Though Houghton's book The Victorian Frame of Mind is one of the most sensible books about the Victorians, yet there are certain reservations which, I think, are important. For though Houghton finds the Victorian mind "a bundle of various and often paradoxical ideas and attitudes"<sup>1</sup>, he still tries to explore and understand it, for he persists in believing that "some point of view must be adopted because otherwise there is no understanding"<sup>2</sup>. Yet, in spite of the fact that the nineteenth century was the age of the machine, and the problems that occupied almost every mind at that time were those which came from the continual conflict between the middle and upper classes and the lower working classes, Houghton devotes his book to exploring "those general ideas and attitudes about life which Victorians of the middle and upper classes would have breathed in with the air"<sup>3</sup>. Of the lower and working classes, he mentions nothing, as if, for him, they did

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1. Houghton, p.xiii.

2. Houghton, p.xiii.

3. Houghton, pp.xiii-xiv.

not exist or they were not part of the Victorian society. Even the less intellectual and more lively members of the middle-class are only slightly considered.

He is largely aware of this and he tells us "the working class as such is not here under consideration"<sup>1</sup>. Yet since Houghton's book fails to embrace all the Victorians, it is unwise to accept it without reservation. When we read his chapter on "love", for example, we see that any reader who still remembers Steerforth and his apparent relations with Rosa Dartle, or Becky Sharp's relation with one of her tutors at the age of eight, can hardly believe that the Victorian child did not know "so much as one word in explanation of the true nature and functions of the reproductive organs"<sup>2</sup>. Nor that most girls, "knew nothing before their marriage night"<sup>3</sup>. It is quite incapable of proof. We have very little evidence about it so far as "most girls" are concerned; and if we are really generalizing about the whole population in the whole period, it must seem rather unlikely. Houghton's book seems too ideal in itself to be regarded as a reliable portrayal of the real life of the Victorians; and there are two reasons for this. One is the fact that it is satisfied with relying on the works of writers and thinkers which reflect the

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1. Houghton, p.xvi.

2. Houghton, p.353.

3. Houghton, p.353.

"official" morality at that time; and the other is that it is nevertheless determined to put a frame of generalization round the Victorians.

Reed's portrayal of the favourite Victorian woman as a "sexless and yielding frail being" can hardly be considered true, for we shall see that the works of the Victorian novelists which introduced characters like Rosa Dartle, Mrs Hurtle, Miss Gwilt and Becky Sharp, were among the popular and favourite books to the Victorians.

As well as this, even obviously conventional heroines are very far from conforming to this stereotype. Strength combined with loyalty, firmness combined with comradeship, are apparently much closer to the Victorian ideal. The Victorians themselves have been responsible through their own sense of humour for giving us the impression that Victorian women were weak, prudish and "yielding", but this obviously shows us the reverse of what they most admired.

Though this period was one when the role of women in society was the subject of impassioned debate, Jenni Calder's and Katherine Moore's portrayals of Victorian women seem somewhat uncertain. It is almost as if they felt that they had some personal grievance, which they can re-express on behalf of their mid-Victorian sisters, rather than a clear idea of how women lived at the time. They appear to write, too, as if they knew that they could count on an expected response from their readers. On the one hand, for example, they seem frequently sure that the woman of the period was

"a slave", "a useless doll", or "a parasite", on the other hand, they are understandably proud, perhaps, that women characters and women writers had obviously gained a new importance. Then they often belittle their own sex by implication, while meaning the opposite. We shall see, on examining some representative novels (in later chapters) that some of their readings cannot be relied upon. As far as generalizations go, moreover, Jenni Calder writes, for example: "perhaps at no other time in British history were men so afraid of women as in the Victorian period, ... and perhaps at no other time did they exploit women to such an extent"(p.88). But how can anyone make such a comparison seriously, even with the generalizer's customary use of two "perhappses"? And if it were thought to be true, why should it have been so? And was this exploitation in revenge, and, if so how did men so easily manage to cow the other half of the human race of whom they were all in such fear? It is difficult for an innocent reader to follow.

So we notice that both these two groups of writers wish us to believe that the Victorians had an "ideal image" of womanhood, which they suppose the accepted morality of that time glorified and exalted. To some extent this is true, yet even if one selects one's evidence to support this view, it is hard to accept that a case can be made out for an effective generalization. The "angels" and "saints" share a common radiance which extinguishes individuality. We cannot learn much from them about Victorian



women because we cannot believe in this perfectly flawless goodness and purity. It is hard to accept that even the "Victorians" who professed to believe the ideal regarded it as an actuality. It belongs more to art than life; and in no art is it less convincing than in the pages of a well-written novel. It is easy to be bewildered by a comparison between the idealisms of real life and its actualities, and the supposed stereotypes of the novel and the fictional characters which we accept as convincing. It is arguable, therefore, that the fiction of the period needs to be read more closely and consistently, and it should not be used to prove a thesis.

When we compare Dr. Acton's famous recorded ideas about women of that time, with the accounts of the author of My Secret Life, we see that it is difficult to find any congruity between them, despite the bonds of locality, time and subject which bind both of them. While Dr. Acton claims that women are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind, Walter, in My Secret Life, claims to have had sexual relations with twelve hundred women, none of whom was in any way frigid. Whether we believe the author of My Secret Life or not, his account will force us, at least, to consider the truth or falsehood of Dr. Acton's statement, and so to revise our whole conception: even if we agree with Steven Marcus that Dr. Acton's beliefs are in the first place associated with class, and that "the majority of women" turns out to refer to the middle-class

only, and fail to "include low and vulgar women--this final ascription might possibly include all working-class females"<sup>1</sup>.

So we must claim the right to have reservations against such statements about Victorians in general, and Victorian morality in particular. In fact the way such "evidence" is handled is often suspect. If Acton states something with which an author agrees then he is regarded an acceptable witness; if he says something with which he disagrees, then he is seen as an example of Victorian prejudice. All the time the conclusions have been predetermined by the present-day writer.

Then Walter's accounts of his life can not seriously be taken as true for (as Professor Geoffrey Best writes) they tend to give us the impression that "any woman, especially where it was obvious that she was not a member of the middle class, was likely to be chucked under the chin, to have her arm pinched, and generally to be subjected to 'the familiarities which nature teaches a man to use towards a woman'"<sup>2</sup>.

As for the middle class, surely John Raleigh is right in saying that there is a considerably overestimation of:  
the nature and extent of its prudery and of

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1. Marcus, p.32.

2. "My Secret Life: Theme and Variations", in Victorian Studies 13(1969-70), 208.

its innocence. In their private and personal lives there is considerable evidence that the Victorians were much less inhibited and conventional than we are, generally speaking, today. By this assertion I do not refer only to the obvious facts of George Eliot's liaison with Lewes, or Dickens' with Ellen Ternan. .... I mean that the general attitude towards the private, "unsanctified" relation, while in theory it might be rigorous, often turned out to be in practice remarkably tolerant.<sup>1</sup>

All this suggests that our views on Victorian sexual activity are probably confused and inadequate, and that for the study of Victorian literature, we have to evolve an entirely new philosophy of sex and sexual relations, less overt and obscene than My Secret Life, less distorted than that of "Acton's official view", but also, perhaps, less "angelic" than we have previously imagined. This must be still more true if we seek to see it in the context of the life of the time, in personal relation, even in the world of fiction. Facts may well be truer than fiction; but they have first to be established. And isolated facts may be very far from being as close to generalized truth, than fiction which is sensitively conceived and faithfully shown.

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1. "Victorian Morals and the Modern Novel" in The Victorian Novel, ed., Ian Watt (London, 1971), p.464.

## CHAPTER II

## The Image of The Fallen Woman—I

## (i)

Contemporary views about the Victorians and conflicting generalizations of the literary critics and their failure, (as we have seen in the previous chapter) to draw a coherent picture of the Victorian woman, not only show an inability to generalize properly, but also confirm our suspicion of the truth of the generalizers' views.

In addition to the suspect "ideal image" of the Victorian woman as a sexless angel or a selfless saint, we also find that most of these critics tend to tell us that to the Victorians, every woman who lapsed from the straight path of virtue or breached the traditional code of behaviour was condemned and considered a repulsive outcast.

In her introduction to Suffer and Be Still, Martha Vicinus writes "the woman who broke the family circle, be she prostitute, adulterer or divorcée, threatened society's very fabric. The most unforgivable sin ... was the married woman who committed adultery"<sup>1</sup>. While Walter Houghton tells us that the Victorian ethic "made fidelity the supreme virtue and sexual irregularity the blackest of sins" and a "feeble and erring woman" he concludes "became, in fact, a social outcast"<sup>2</sup>.

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1. Ed. Martha Vicinus, Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age (London, 1980), p.xiv.

2. Houghton, p.356.

Gail Cunningham also in her study of The New Woman and The Victorian Novel sees the same picture reflected in the novels of the period. She says:

In major and minor writers alike we find the same fundamental assumptions: women's main concerns are those of love, the home and family; they are morally fragile, continually threatened with the fatal fall from the purity which defines their respectability; and any hint of sexuality is dangerous and usually damning. Marriage is to be regarded as final: if a woman voluntarily abandons it, she puts herself beyond the social pale.<sup>1</sup>

Not only that, we find that some critics stretch the Victorians' ostracism and condemnation further to include any woman who showed strong feelings or sexual desire. "Passion in women", Jenni Calder writes, "baffled Victorian society. It suggested at best irregularity and nonconformity, at worst, sin".<sup>2</sup> She takes Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre as an example, and she writes "passion in Jane Eyre amounts to sin. For a child to have strong feelings and to express them is wholly inappropriate, a challenge to the correct order of things"<sup>3</sup>; a dubious comment. While Patricia Stubbs, in her book Women and Fiction, writes of the double standard of sexual morality which:

punished with social ostracism any woman who breached the sexual taboos, but which blandly ignored male offences. This was an effective way of policing women, of

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1. Gail Cunningham, The New Woman and the Victorian Novel (London, 1978), pp.43-4.

2. Calder, p.144.

3. Calder, p.111.

penalizing any who demonstrated that they were not the a-sexual beings of popular mythology and so inadvertently reminding the community of the hidden, unacknowledged, and possibly disturbing existence of female desire".<sup>1</sup>

This "sexual ideology" she tells us often "scarred" Dickens's work. According to her, Dickens is not alone in "desexualizing both women and love in nineteenth-century fiction, but in him the process of deodorization goes well beyond what most major novelists achieved".<sup>2</sup>

Commenting on his portrayal of women she writes:

Dickens's good women have affections and warm hearts, but never sexual desires; his tainted women, the adulteresses, are or may have been involved in liaisons, but they are essentially cold, emotionally aloof and icy. None of his women display anything faintly resembling sexual passion, so that love in Dickens is either a very tame, essentially domestic affair, or a melodramatic horror of disgrace and guilt.<sup>3</sup>

The unexamined assumptions which these critics tend to make are not only far from being acceptable, but many of them are also incapable of proof. Their extreme view of the Victorians' attitude to "passion" in women or to "passionate women" is not less peculiar and damaging than their generalizations about the "ideal image" of the Victorian women which we have seen in the previous chapter.

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1. Patricia Stubbs, Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920 (Brighton, 1979), p.10.

2. Stubbs, p.30.

3. Stubbs, pp.30-31.

I am not going to give a detailed examination of these assumptions for I hope that the following study of the image and treatment of these women in some of the fiction of the period will show the injustice that these writers do the Victorians and the distorted picture which they wish us to believe. Yet before doing so, I would like to mention, briefly, some points concerning these views.

Jenni Calder's view about "passion" and her comment on Jane Eyre are superficial. Charlotte Brontë knew what a "sin" was, and was very clear that it could not lie simply in "passion": the whole point of the novel is that passion and reason have to be allied. As for Patricia Stubbs's view of the "social ostracism" of women who breached the "sexual taboos", and "the a-sexual beings of popular mythology", it does not strip from all Victorian women their emotions and feelings, but looks on them rather as a sexless species than as human beings. Her view of invariably "cold, emotionally aloof and icy" women in Dickens's works, and her claim that "none of his women display anything faintly resembling sexual passion" is not only naive, but a deliberate distortion which any reader at all familiar with Dickens's work will realize. We have already seen a similar damaging assumption about Dickens's women before and the examination, which we have already seen, of the falsity of such a claim, and the study of "passion" in Rosa Dartle and some "passionate women", which we will see in a later part, will, no doubt, show the superficiality of such an assumption.

Even the social ostracism and the image of the "outcast" which Gail Cunningham, Martha Vicinus and Walter Houghton try to perpetuate cannot be generalized as the attitude of all Victorians to "the fallen woman". For as we know, most of the studies about Victorians in general, and the working class in particular, seem to agree that morality to some of the working-class meant very little. Working-class women were often far from leading a stable domestic life. For these women, who spent their days crowded with other labourers in vile factories and their nights in congested slums and who already stood on the lowest level of existence, prostitution was not necessarily a fall. It was just a source of supplementary income for the under-paid. They resorted to it selling their only marketable item to improve their conditions, and so we are told that:

The concept of the outcast was, however, meaningless to that class which actually filled the prostitutes' ranks. Working-class women who took to the streets were not excommunicated by their families, friends, and neighbours; they were pitied, abused, exploited, or even admired by their immediate community, but they were not rejected.<sup>1</sup>

In fact we notice that these critics tend to take the assumptions and behaviour of one class, the middle class, as the moral truth of the entire society. Yet, even among the middle class, we notice that many middle-class reformers eagerly sought to assist the prostitute to a reformed life. Refuges for reforming these women were established, and the "ostracised outcast" was looked at as a lost "Magdalen",

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1. Fraser Harrison, The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality (Glasgow, 1979), p.247.



and there was a great hope of her redemption.

Gail Cunningham's generalization that "the assumptions" of "major and minor writers" that "any hint of sexuality is dangerous and usually damning", and the woman who abandons marriage "puts herself beyond the social pale"<sup>1</sup>, and Martha Vicinus's view that woman's fall was "the most unforgivable sin"<sup>2</sup>, are partly misleading.

The subject of woman's fall worried the Victorians and we see that writers from the early years of the period down to Thomas Hardy and George Moore treated this subject. Gail Cunningham and Martha Vicinus's views may be true as far as the treatment of the early novelists of this problem is concerned, where the fallen woman had to die so that by her death, the writer could excite his reader's feelings of pity and sympathy for her and win their forgiveness. But with the advent of the fifties, we find that writers and novelists started to take different attitudes towards this subject.

In the following part a trial is made to study the treatment of these women in some of the fiction of the period, and to trace the development of the novelists' treatment and views on this subject.

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1. Cunningham, pp.43-44.

2. Vicinus, p.xiv.

(ii)

Among the early prominent Victorian novelists who dealt with the subject of "the fallen woman", we distinguish Charles Dickens and Mrs Gaskell. My choice of studying the treatment of the subject in some of the works of these two novelists does not necessarily mean that they were the only writers who dealt with the subject and faced the problem. My choice of these two writers is selective and justified by two reasons. First, they were concerned with the subject in several of their works, and showed their earnest concern over the problem in their practical activities as well as by their writings. Second, we notice that their views about it developed with the years, and consequently their later treatment of their "fallen women" differed noticeably from the earlier one.

We may take Dickens's Oliver Twist and Mrs Gaskell's Mary Barton and Lizzie Leigh as examples of the earlier treatment of the subject in the forties, and then move to Ruth and David Copperfield: two novels by the same authors published in the early fifties. Then I will try to trace the change that took place in these writers' views and treatment of "the fallen woman".

Dickens meant Oliver Twist, his first attempt at a novel proper, to be a picture of the "dregs of life" in which he could show prostitutes "in all their deformity, in all their wretchedness, in all the squalid misery of their lives; to show them as they really were, for ever

skulking uneasily through the dirtiest paths of life"<sup>1</sup>. Such a picture he believed was needed and "it would be a service to society"<sup>2</sup>.

Among the wretched and miserable that he portrayed, Nancy (a prostitute of the underworld), was a key figure. He told Forster "I hope to do great things with Nancy"<sup>3</sup>. Yet the literary fashion and moral conventions of the 1840s which jeopardized the sales of any serious writer who tried to lift the veil of secrecy which shrouded the existence of sexual immorality, made Dickens try to "banish from the lips of the lowest character" introduced "any expression that could by possibility offend"<sup>4</sup>. The characterization both revealed and concealed the subject. In a work of fiction meant for general reading and entertainment Dickens clearly felt that there was a limit to the degree to which he would be outspoken. It was with anxious effort that he wanted to expose the truth about such a woman as Nancy, yet he left it half obscure whether or not she could be called a "prostitute".

Even so, to the unworldly who "might still have been in doubt as to her profession when they reached the last page"<sup>5</sup>,

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1. In Dickens's preface to the 1867 edition of Oliver Twist.

2. Preface to 1867 edition, p.ii.

3. Philip Collins, Dickens and Crime (London, 1965), p.96.

4. Dickens's preface to the 1841 edition of Oliver Twist, quoted in P. Collins, Dickens and Crime, p.96.

5. Patricia Thomson, The Victorian Heroine: A Changing Ideal 1837-1873 (London, 1956), p.120.

and the several critics who accused him of concealing the truth, Dickens gave "in his preface to the third edition, something more to think about by referring to her roundly as a prostitute and defending his motives with spirit"<sup>1</sup>.

It is a curious illustration of the power of the dual conception of womanhood held at the time. On the one hand, a woman might be conceived of as someone refined and somewhat remote from ordinary life like Rose Maylie. On the other hand, there was a certain fascination in her degradation, even though that could be shown only indirectly. There was, in addition, an awareness that the two elements might be combined: a discovery upon which Dickens appears to have seized as the novel developed. For at first Nancy is no more than a "stout and hearty" girl, like Betsy,<sup>2</sup> as she dreads to visit the police-station after Oliver's arrest, she winks and smiles to the company, and she shows some spirit in recapturing Oliver. Or, perhaps, the discovery is one that Dickens meant the reader to make.

One of the problems for Dickens, in showing Nancy, was that it could hardly be realistic to show her as having "fallen". She had evidently been an easy victim for Fagin, who might be said to have corrupted her and profited from her gain. She had stolen for him when "a child not half as

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1. Thomson, p.120.

2. Oliver Twist (Heron books, 1980), p.78. All subsequent references are given in the text.

old as" Oliver (16:144) and had been "in the same trade" of prostitution, for "twelve years since"(16:144). Such fall as there is has been from a state which she could never have been aware; yet we are led to believe that she understands her degradation:

The girl's life had been squandered in the streets, and among the most noisome of the stews and dens of London, but there was something of the woman's original nature left in her still . . . . But struggling with these better feelings was pride . . . . Even this degraded being felt too proud to betray a feeble gleam of the womanly feeling which she thought a weakness, but which alone connected her with that humanity, of which her wasting life had obliterated so many, many traces when a very child (40:371).

In her meeting with Rose Maylie, Nancy tells her past history:

"Thank Heaven upon your knees, dear lady", cried the girl, "that you had friends to care for and keep you in your childhood, and that you were never in the midst of cold and hunger, and riot and drunkenness, and-and-something worse than all-as I have been from my cradle. I may use the word, ~~some~~ ~~thing~~, for the alley and the gutter were mine, as they will be my death-bed"(40:373).

Yet what Dickens does is to show her as more sinned against than sinning. She is almost the only member of Fagin's gang who is able to show sincere human feeling and selfless love. She feels a human sympathy for the prisoners when she passes a prison, and tells Sikes that if he were among them, "I'd walk round and round the place till I dropped, if the snow was on the ground, and I hadn't a shawl to cover me"(16:137). She has pity for Oliver. She is a devoted wife to Sikes. Her redemption is shown in human terms, although Dickens

chose to justify it in the 1841 preface as "emphatically God's truth ... the truth He leaves in such depraved and miserable breasts ... the last fair drop of water at the bottom of the weed-choked well". Dickens takes two mere "conventions", the ideal nature of womanhood and the depravity of the prostitute, and combines them in a remarkable dramatisation which he had some right to claim was also true to humanity. For, under the spell of her devotion to Sikes and loyalty to Fagin she acts passively and indifferently, but later we notice that the good side of her nature rebels and her moral conscience starts to work. When Oliver attempts to escape and is pursued by Fagin and two of his boys, Nancy stands before the door and screams to Sikes "keep back the dog, Bill ... the child shan't be torn down by the dog, unless you kill me first" (16:141). When Fagin returns with Oliver and takes up a club to punish him Nancy bursts out:

"You've got the boy, and what more would you have?—Let him be—let him be—or I shall put that mark on some of you, that will bring me to the gallows before my time" (16:142).

The rebellion of Nancy's moral conscience works itself to a higher extent. She attacks Fagin passionately and curses him for what he has made her:

"you villain! .... I thieved for you when I was a child not half old as this!" pointing to Oliver .... "The cold, wet, dirty streets are my home; and you're the wretch that drove me to them long ago, and that'll keep me there, day and night, day and night, till I die" (16:144).

The good left in her original nature and the outburst of her moral conscience establishes Nancy's link with humanity and from this point on in the novel she works for good and acts positively to help Oliver. She turns against the criminals and makes the decisive move towards her salvation.

In her meeting with Rose Maylie, Nancy recognizes her sin by telling Rose her own story of stealing for Fagin and living with Sikes. She expresses her deep remorse and contrition and says to Rose:

"You would serve me best, ... if you could take my life at once; for I have felt more grief to think of what I am, to-night, than I ever did before"(40:378).

She tries to atone by risking her life to reveal the underworld plan to Rose and Mr Brownlow which leads to her brutal death. Though Rose Maylie offers to help her, Nancy finds it too late. Sinking on her knees, she cries:

"Lady," ... "dear, sweet, angel lady, you are the first that ever blessed me with such words as these, and if I had heard them years ago, they might have turned me from a life of sin and sorrow; but it is too late, it is too late!"

"It is never too late," said Rose, "for penitence and atonement."

"It is," cried the girl, writhing in the agony of her mind; "I cannot leave him now! I could not be his death"(40:376).

Nancy's womanly feeling, her compassion, selfless love and devotion, take her back to Sikes and eventually to her violent death. By her return to Sikes and her consequent death, Dickens succeeds in arousing his reader's feeling of pity and sympathy for her.

Nancy dies on her knees, raising Rose Maylie's white handkerchief, an emblem of repentance, "saved from despair at the last moment" she expiates "her guilt in her innocent blood"<sup>1</sup>.

The end to which Nancy comes must seem shocking, but this was possibly the only way left for Dickens to end it. In the late thirties, Dickens was writing for a different public whose moral and social values did not only condemn the sinner, but generally considered her an outcast. Though Nancy's death satisfies the traditional morality of that time, yet we notice that in his treatment of the subject, Dickens tends to show her as a victim of circumstances rather than a sinner.

Though Nancy is a fallen woman, yet she has a good nature. She is not portrayed as a vicious woman. The good side of her nature grows throughout the novel until it culminates in sacrificing her life for the sake of doing good, and by this means she excites the reader's feeling of pity and sympathy. Though Dickens clearly felt that he could not allow her any earthly reward, yet in portraying her repentant death there is an indication that forgiveness and a heavenly reward are possible.

We have to consider, too, how outspoken the novel is in another way. Oliver's half-sister, Rose, has been (apparently falsely) said to have been illegitimate. The

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1. A.O.J. Cockshut, Man and Woman: A Study of Love and the Novel 1740-1940 (London, 1977), p.21.



novel emphatically tries to show that it is what people are in themselves which is important, not the circumstances of their parentage or birth. In one respect it is a very astonishing rebuttal of contemporary prejudice and convention. In other respects, however, we may well suspect that it supports new conventions, to which little attention has been paid. These are that there is now a radically different way of looking at human nature. That the old conventions of the letter must be questioned. That everything depends on what one is in oneself. And Oliver Twist expresses the conflict between the old and new conventions with extraordinary power.

Mary Barton (1848), is another recognized book of the forties which also deals with the subject, and which can be considered as an example of Mrs Gaskell's early treatment of the fallen woman, a subject for which she showed a great concern and which recurs in many of her works. In fact, she can be considered as the first Victorian novelist to devote a whole novel to it.

Like Dickens, Mrs Gaskell's views changed with the years, and if we study her treatment of the "fallen woman" in Mary Barton, Lizzie Leigh and Ruth, we will be able to notice how <sup>the change</sup> ~~it~~ took place.

Starting with Mary Barton, Mrs Gaskell's treatment may be seen as like Dickens's in Oliver Twist. As we have noticed in Nancy's case, Mrs Gaskell makes of Mary's aunt Esther a figure whom society should look at with sympathy instead of condemnation. Esther has been an ignorant girl who "spent

her money in dress, thinking to set off her pretty face"<sup>1</sup>. She has aspired to become a lady "though she never got butter to her bread"(1:44). Motivated by her love of finery and false aspirations she eloped with a lover in the hope of fulfilling her dreams. Her lover, "an officer with the class-consciousness of his profession" had had "no intention of marrying the factory worker"<sup>2</sup>, and Esther easily became his victim. After three days of what seemed happiness to her, he had abandoned her and left her with a baby, to face the alternative of prostitution or starvation. The baby had fallen ill and when she wrote to the father for help she "never got an answer"(14:210). Suffering from poverty, starvation and the sense that her child was suffering, she had resorted to prostitution.

In her meeting with Jem, she describes the conditions that drove her to the street:

It was winter, cold bleak winter; and my child was so ill, so ill, and I was starving. And I could not bear to see her suffer, and forgot how much better it would be for us to die together;— oh her moans, her moans, which money would give me the means of relieving! So I went out into the street (14:210).

Esther is not portrayed as a bad woman who readily takes to the street, nor does she seem to get any sexual pleasure from her prostitution. She is forced to a life of suffering and misery, and she has to "dull her senses with drink to

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1. Mary Barton, (Penguin edition, 1978), p.43. All subsequent references are given in the text.

2. Aina Rubenius, The Woman Question in Mrs Gaskell's Life and Works (Uppsala, 1950), p.183.

carry on".<sup>1</sup>

Her fall is caused by her thoughtlessness and ignorance. She had been ignorant of the nature of her seducer, and had realized her fault only when too late. She tells Jem "he promised me marriage. They all do" (14:209). Suffering and misery could not harden her heart, and as Nancy tried to save Oliver from the underworld gang, Esther has also returned to Manchester to do good. She strives to save Mary from being tempted in the same way, but her fall and disgrace hamper her good intentions. She is denied any opportunity of being listened to. Every one turns his back on her or shakes her off in disgust. The disgrace she has fallen to has left its mark on her, and her degradation can be told

by her faded finery, all unfit to meet the pelting of that pitiless storm; the gauze bonnet, once pink, now dirty white, the muslin gown, all draggled, and soaking wet up to the very knees; the gay-coloured barège shawl, closely wrapped round the form (10:168).

This scene in which Mrs Gaskell describes Esther's reappearance in Manchester is a crucial one in the plot, and Mrs Gaskell's plea for sympathy for the outcast. It suggests the sympathetic attitude to the fallen woman and exposes the self-righteous cruelty of John Barton and society at large against her. He "curses and rebuffs her simply

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1. Edgar Wright, Mrs Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment (London, 1965), p.69.

because she is a prostitute, even before he recognizes her"<sup>1</sup>, but when her voice flashes across him, he drags her to the lamp-post and holds her face to the light, and at once he discovers the

long-lost Esther .... Much was like the gay creature of former years; but the glaring paint, the sharp features, the changed expression of the whole! (10:169).

In this scene Mrs Gaskell shows also the evils of prostitution, and the miserable suffering which the outcast undergoes. John Barton sees in Esther's face the "lovely mouth" and "the gay creature of former years" that reminds us of the virginal Esther, but the use of the contrastive element "but" which follows directly refers to a change, "the unnatural bright grey eyes", "glaring paint" and "sharp features" testify to her degraded position. The use of the word "former" here refers to the past, "the gay creature of former years" refers to the happy Esther of the past and not the present Esther. The description of her clothing and her faded finery, and the contrast between "the gauze bonnet, once pink" now "dirty white" reflects the contrast between her past and her miserable present.

She is avoided and rebuffed. No one will even let her approach him in order not to be contaminated. Here, at this point in the book, the narrator enters the scene to plead for sympathy and pity and to make her attack on

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1. Patricia Beer, Reader I Married Him (Bristol, 1974), p.137.

collective condemnation:

To whom shall the outcast prostitute tell  
her tale! Who will give her help in her  
day of need? Hers is the leper-sin, and  
all stand aloof dreading to be counted  
unclean(14:207).

Esther "meekly accepts Society's view of herself as an  
outcast, she is filled with remorse and grief over her own  
sinful life, but makes no attempt to regain respectability".<sup>1</sup>  
Like Nancy in Oliver Twist, she refuses Jem's offer to help  
her come home:

God bless you, Jem, for the words you have  
just spoken. Some years ago you might have  
saved me, as I hope and trust you will yet  
save Mary. But it is too late now; - too  
late, she added, with accents of deep despair(14:213).

As Nancy dies raising the white handkerchief, Esther:

held the locket containing her child's hair  
still in her hand, and once or twice she  
kissed it with a long soft kiss. She cried  
feebly and sadly as long as she had any  
strength to cry, and then she died(38:465).

Mrs Gaskell's attitude towards her is embodied in Jem's  
pity towards "the broken butterfly" and in the inscription  
on the epitaph of the grave which she shares with John  
Barton "For He will not always chide, neither will He keep  
his anger for ever"(38:465), which as Patricia Beer says,  
"carries the whole weight of Victorian sorrowful wrath".<sup>2</sup>  
Nevertheless, it is ultimately forgiving.

Esther follows an apparently conventional path into

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1. Rubenius, pp.187-8.

2. Beer, p.141.

prostitution and death. Like Nancy in Oliver Twist, she is given no chance of possible reconciliation with society, although the idea of taking her back to respectable society and life is hinted <sup>at</sup> through Jem's "interior monologue":

But before he reached the end of the street, even in the midst of the jealous anguish that filled his heart, his conscience smote him. He had not done enough to save her. One more effort, and she might have come. Nay, twenty efforts would have been well rewarded by her yielding. He turned back, but she was gone (14:214).

Yet we find that this "possibility is rhetorically hinted at but not developed"<sup>1</sup>. Esther refuses the offer of recovery and accepts her fate as a retribution for her sin. Beyond the book's plea for pity and sympathy for the outcast, we find no further ray of hope.

In certain respects it is again an extraordinary work, and even this apparently conventional element in the novel is a tribute to Mrs Gaskell's originality. For, what connection is there between the tale of conflict between classes and the story of Esther? In some ways, there is just the easy moral that sins of the upper classes are visited on the lower: that the officer who betrays Esther, or Harry who would cheerfully have seduced Mary Barton, are thoughtlessly responsible for the sufferings of others. However seriously this might be argued, it remains superficial. No attempt is made to support this view as the novel develops. The rejection of the fallen woman is as

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1. Wright, p.69.

strong on the part of her own class as the one above her. What Mrs Gaskell is asking for, even in this simple story, is the radical ability to be able to look at a conventional situation in a new way. It ought to be possible to forgive Esther, as it ought eventually even be possible to forgive the murderer of one's son, be it by bullet or starvation. To conventional society, the rejection of the fallen woman was a collective judgement which must be imposed. To the Unitarian Christian, such as Mrs Gaskell, all ethical judgements must be looked at as matters of conscience.

Although "The Well of Pen-Morfa", is not the next work of Mrs Gaskell that we have to consider, it is much briefer than Lizzie Leigh, and it is convenient to look at it first. In fact, the incident that concerns a "fallen woman", is only an anecdote given at the start of the story. It is about an unnamed unfortunate, who "had been taken to London by the family whom she served"<sup>1</sup>. In London, the poor girl had been seduced, and after a year or so, had come back to Pen-Morfa. "Her beauty gone into that sad, wild, despairing look ... and about to become a mother"(p.182).

Like any "unfortunate", she was doomed to a life of grief and misery. She lived alone in constant pain, nursing her child who, we are told, "was deformed and had lost the use of its lower limbs" and "had been for fifteen years bedridden"(p.182).

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1. Household Words, 2(16 and 23 Nov., 1850), All subsequent references are in the text.

The price of expiating her sin is so high, and in her suffering and solitude watching and "soothing the moaning child", the narrator is able to hope that "the woman and her child are dead now and their souls above" (p.182). Her mute endurance and patient love for the child impress her neighbours. They show a feeling of sympathy at a distance, but the woman, whom Mrs Gaskell does not name remains alone. In her penance for her sin, she refuses to accept the neighbourly kindness with a view to intensifying her penance.

Why it is introduced as part of the introduction to another tale it is hard to say. It may be artlessness on Mrs Gaskell's part, or it may have been that she wanted to add it to make her second story appear more real. The two tales share the "moral" that it is women who suffer most, and that they punish themselves even more than they need by the wish to expiate their misfortune. Both, too, are pleas for pity, tolerance and forgiveness.

Mary Barton had established Mrs Gaskell's name among the recognized writers of her time, so that when Dickens decided to start Household Words (1850), he wrote to her expressing his admiration of her work and asking her to contribute to his new periodical. In his letter to her he wrote:

I do honestly know that there is no living English writer whose aid I would desire to enlist in preference to the authoress of "Mary Barton" (a book that most profoundly affected and impressed me), I venture to ask you whether you can give me any hope



that you will write a short tale, or any number of tales, for projected pages".<sup>1</sup>

Mrs Gaskell responded and Lizzie Leigh was her first contribution which was distinguished by assignment to the first place, directly after the editor's "preliminary word" in the first number of the periodical.

Lizzie Leigh is the story of a young girl sent to Manchester to "go among strangers, and learn to rough it".<sup>2</sup> In Manchester, the poor girl who was only seventeen had fallen to temptation and been led astray. Her mistress had written to say that Lizzie "had left her service" (p.4).

In her treatment of Lizzie's fall, Mrs Gaskell shows two different attitudes towards "the lost girl". There is the strict moralistic attitude represented by the stern and inflexible father, and the sympathetic and human attitude represented by Mrs Leigh, the mother. In fact, we see that these two different attitudes stretch further to include one of the brothers and the girl he loves, Susan Palmer, so that we can arrange the characters in the story in two different groups according to the way they respond to the sinner.

The father shows his hardness towards his "fallen daughter", forbids his wife to search for her and declares "that henceforth they" will "have no daughter" (1:4) while the brother fears that the family's disgrace may affect

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1. The Letters of Charles Dickens 1833-1870, ed., by his sister-in-law and his eldest daughter [Georgiana Hogarth and Mary Dickens] (London, 1880), I, 216.
  2. Household Words (30 March to April 13, 1850). All subsequent references are in the text.



Susan's consideration of him and wishes his sister dead than alive. Ostracized and ignored by the family, Lizzie moves from bad to worse, and her life takes from seduction to prostitution. Though "the moan and murmur had never been out of the heart" of the sympathetic and loving mother since "the disappearance of her daughter", yet her "wifely duty" to her husband hinders all her efforts to save her child (1:2).

In Lizzie's taking to the street after her seduction, Mrs Gaskell tries to show the inhumanity of the condemnatory attitude and its futility in dealing with the problem by showing its dreadful consequences. She sides with the other women in the story who take a tolerant and charitable attitude showing their love and sympathy for the unfortunate girl, and it is through their love and humanity, that the lost is eventually saved. Mrs Leigh's attitude regarding Susan can be taken as Mrs Gaskell's view of society and people at large:

If she's so good as thou say'st, she'll  
have pity on such as my Lizzie. If she  
has no pity for such, she's a cruel  
Pharisee, and thou'rt best without her (2:32).

Susan's attitude to Lizzie also "may safely be taken as the one which Mrs Gaskell felt to be right"<sup>1</sup>, and she turns out to be her ideal of a young woman. She did not lower or veil her eyes when she heard of Lizzie's fall, and she blamed Will, the brother, for his cruelty and lack of

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1. Hazel Mews, Frail Vessels: Woman's Role in Women's Novels from Fanny Burney to George Eliot (London, 1969), p.84.

sympathy:

"Oh!" she said with a sudden burst, "Will Leigh! I have thought so well of you; don't go and make me think you cruel and hard. Goodness is not goodness unless there is mercy and tenderness with it"(4:64).

Through Mrs Leigh and Susan, Mrs Gaskell enters the story to express her views. Her idea of a possible reformation of Lizzie comes early in the story in the meeting between Mrs Leigh and Susan who says to Mrs Leigh "for all that's come and gone, she may turn right at last. Mary Magdalen did, you know"(2:34).

Though the idea of a possible reformation is mentioned, yet we notice that Lizzie does not attain it before she has shown deep contrition and shame for her sin:

"Mother, don't look at me! I have been so wicked!" and instantly she hid her face, and grovelled among the bedclothes, and lay like one dead—so motionless was she (4:64).

Nor is it attained before she goes through a life of suffering and retribution which made her "old before her time; her beauty was gone." Even in

her sleep she bore the look of woe and despair which was the prevalent expression of her face by day; even in her sleep she had forgotten how to smile. But all these marks of the sin and sorrow she had passed through only made her mother love her the more (4:63).

Lizzie is spared the traditional death, she finds refuge in her mother when the pair retire to live together. Though the story can be considered as an advanced step on the way of repentance and forgiveness, yet it has been said that there is "no social forgiveness, the pair retire

to live in deep isolation quietly doing good".<sup>1</sup> Her father grants her his forgiveness only on his death-bed, and her more obstinate brother forgives her only at a distance. Like Esther, Lizzie is not allowed to keep her daughter, and the baby is (in a sense) sacrificed on the altar of conventions. Lizzie is "doomed to spend the rest of her life in grief and remorse"<sup>2</sup>, working for her eternal salvation:

Every sound of sorrow in the whole upland is heard there—every call of suffering or of sickness for help is listened to, by a sad, gentle-looking woman, who rarely smiles (and when she does, her smile is more sad than other people's tears) (4:65).

She prays for forgiveness and reunion with her child. She often takes "to the sunny graveyard in the uplands, and while the little creature gathers the daisies, and makes chains, Lizzie sits by a little grave, and weeps bitterly"(4:65).

Again, the story can be seen as a very strange one. In one sense it is extremely simple, since it is a direct plea for love and forgiveness. What it makes very clear is that the prejudice or bitterness at fallen women is seen as coming from men. It is allied with a strong wish to stand well in respectable working class society. It belongs to a harsh world in which men are dominant, and women suffer. It is both conventional and unconventional.

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1. Wright, p.70.

2. Rubenius, p.180.

It is hard to know what Dickens made of it. It may well be that he felt that he had got more than he bargained for, since it lost its place in the leading position after the first number, and he showed some anxiety in one letter to Mrs Gaskell about the way in which she told the story.

In some ways it is an advance on the story of Esther, in that Lizzie herself survives, even though her child dies and she spends the rest of her life in sorrow and repentance. As a work of literature it seems almost immature. Its didactic purpose is too obvious. But it makes a stage in the development of the whole story of the treatment of the "fallen woman".

(iii)

Though the stories of Mary's escape from seduction and of Esther's fall and her consequent suffering are important parts of the plot of Mrs Gaskell's first novel, we notice that they are not the main concern of the book. For Mrs Gaskell, herself, did not see Mary as the chief figure of her novel: "it was at the publisher's request" she said, "that she gave up the original title, 'John Barton'".<sup>1</sup> Even so, Mrs Gaskell does refer to the subject of the fallen woman within the social frame of her book in which she tried to show class differences and miseries, and to expose the social-conditions of the working classes and

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1. See Françoise Basch, Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel 1837-67 (London, 1974), p.244.

the effects of the industrial system on their lives.

With the advent of a new decade, some writers and novelists tried to liberate themselves from the hold of the conventions of their time and started to tackle the subject more openly; and in writing Ruth in 1853, Mrs Gaskell has been said to be the "first novelist in nineteenth-century England to take a fallen woman as her central character".<sup>1</sup>

In making Ruth, a seduced girl and unmarried mother, the heroine of her book, and in bringing her to the foreground of the story, and in discussing her difficulties with a distinctive openness while pushing all the other unrelated elements of the plot into the smallest space in the background, Mrs Gaskell made an audacious attempt to speak her mind on the subject. In a letter addressed to her sister-in-law she wrote, "I have spoken out my mind in the best way I can and I have no doubt that what was meant so earnestly must do some good"<sup>2</sup>.

Her choice of the heroine's name is not accidental, it is deliberately chosen. It harks back to the Biblical "Ruth", the sad, docile and unselfish creature, and it was used over and over again by many writers and

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1. Angus Easson, Elizabeth Gaskell (London, 1979), p.114.

2. J.J. Van Dulleman, Mrs Gaskell, Novelist & Biographer (Amsterdam, 1924), p.204.

poets<sup>1</sup> so that the association of this archetypal name might call up a beautiful and faithful creature, who was to some extent unfortunate. Mrs Gaskell combined in the creation of her character all these elements and added some of her own invention which enabled her heroine to convey her message.

Ruth can be considered as a protest against the manner in which "the fallen woman" was regarded, spoken of and treated. Mrs Gaskell wanted to show the falsity of the traditional opinion which condemned the fallen woman and regarded her as vicious and irredeemably corrupt; and tried to show that "one false step does not necessarily destroy a woman's 'purity'"<sup>2</sup>.

Contrary to the literary tradition, though the heroine of her book does fall she does not become a prostitute. She "rises" again, becomes a useful member of society, and at last, regains her self-respect. Not only that, but Mrs Gaskell seeks to show that Ruth's fall should also be looked at as "a misfortune rather than a crime"<sup>3</sup>.

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1. Wordsworth wrote a sad story of "Ruth" (1800), Keats referred to her in "Ode to the Nightingale" (1819), Thomas Hood wrote a poem entitled "Ruth" (1827), and George Crabbe wrote his poem "Ruth" in his Tales of The Hall (1819) which A.A. Ward in his introduction to the Knutsford edition of Ruth says, suggested the name to Mrs Gaskell.

2. Rubenius, p.184.

3. Arthur Pollard, Mrs Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer (Manchester, 1965), p.88.

To achieve this end Mrs Gaskell insists on Ruth's innocence throughout the story and tries on many occasions to demonstrate it.

Before her seduction, Ruth is presented as a child of fifteen whose mother had died before giving her "any cautions or words of advice respecting the subject of a woman's life"<sup>1</sup>. She is "little accustomed to oppose the wishes of anyone; obedient and docile by nature, and unsuspecting and innocent of any harmful consequences" (4:60). She is innocent and "pure snow". She had "heard of falling in love, but did not know the signs and symptoms thereof" (3:44). She likes the Camelia flower which Bellingham has given her, not because of the fact that he has given it to her but because of its exquisite beauty: "I wish it to be exactly as it is—it is perfect. So pure!" (2:18). She even is perplexed about paying for a cup of tea she had at an inn.

After her seduction, she is for a while happy. She does not seem to feel any natural revulsion at the loss of her chastity, nor is she aware that she is living in sin until the knowledge is forced upon her. Even when she utters her fatal "yes" to her seducer's suggestion to accompany him to London after her dismissal from her employer's service, she says it in pure ignorance of its "infinite consequences" (4:57).

Her innocence and childish ignorance are made to account

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1. Ruth (Everyman's Library edition, 1974), p.43. All subsequent references are given in the text.



for her fall, and she is branded as sinful, then Mrs Gaskell tries to make her sin seem mainly "the sin of ignorance".

Ruth is saved from a "conventional" suicide by Mr Benson. He represents the positive moral attitude, and is the charitable true Christian who saves Ruth from destroying herself. It is chiefly through him that Mrs Gaskell expresses her ideas and views. The news of the child's advent strengthens his belief in Ruth's possible redemption. While his sister refers to the expected child as a badge of shame, Benson sees it as the instrument of Ruth's salvation, and tells his sister:

"Do you know I rejoice in this child's advent? .... If her life has hitherto been self-seeking and wickedly thoughtless, here is the very instrument to make her forget herself, and be thoughtful for another. Teach her (and God will teach her, if man does not come between) to reverence her child; and this reverence will shut out sin,—will be purification"(11:117-8).

For Ruth, the child is a blessing: "Oh, my God, I thank Thee! Oh, I will be so good!(11:117). She is no longer just the submissive girl, she becomes a woman. With the Bensons' care and protection she is saved. Her life with them "appears as a process of purification"<sup>1</sup>. With the boy's birth she rouses herself. She starts to educate herself for the sake of teaching Leonard, her child, and she grows in character and faith, and becomes a different person:

There was something about either it or her,  
or the people amongst whom she had been thrown

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1. John Geoffrey Sharps, Mrs Gaskell's Observation and Invention: A Study of Her-Biographic Works (London, 1970), p.150.

during the last few years, which had so changed her, that whereas, six or seven years ago, you would have perceived that she was not altogether a lady by birth and education, yet now she might have been placed among the highest in the land, and would have been taken by the most critical judge for their equal (19:207).

The reappearance of her seducer, Bellingham, in her life shows us the conflict between Ruth's heart and mind, between Ruth of the past and Ruth of the present, between the innocent ignorant child and the mature woman:

"If I might see him! If I might see him!  
If I might just ask him why he left me;  
if I had vexed him in any way; it was so  
strange—so cruel! It was not him; it  
was his mother" .... "He did not care  
for me, as I did for him. He did not  
care for me at all," she went on wildly  
and sharply. "He did me cruel harm.  
I can never again lift up my face in  
innocence .... Oh, darling love! am I  
talking against you?" asked she tenderly.  
"I am so torn and perplexed! You, who  
are the father of my child!" (23:270).

The mentioning of her "child" threw "a new light into her mind. It changed her from the woman into the mother—the stern guardian of her child" (23:270). Here the conflict moves to a new stage. It splits Ruth between her love for Bellingham and her love for Leonard:

"He left me. He might have been hurried off, but he might have inquired—he might have learned and explained. He left me ... and never cared to learn, as he might have done, of Leonard's birth. He has no love for his child, and I will have no love for him" (23:270-1).

Her love for her child triumphs over her own. She decides to renounce the cruel father in the interest of her child. Her devoted love for the child, and her motherly protective

instinct to keep Leonard away from him make her refuse Bellingham's offer of marriage:

If there were no other reason to prevent our marriage but the one fact that it would bring Leonard into contact with you, that would be enough (24:300).

Ruth's care for the good of her child raises her above society's disapproval. Her refusal to marry Bellingham is her own decision taken without advice or consultation. This refusal, according to Françoise Basch is a "challenge to the social conventions which Jane Eyre did not dare make" and it "asserts Ruth's moral superiority over both the father of her child and over her judges"<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, though this comment is striking, it is probably another example of a wish to score off the Victorians. A loveless marriage with Bellingham could not undo the wrong on his part, nor the wrong to the child; and it is partly because of this that Ruth refuses. Her refusal may be an act of independence, but it also asserts morality. In fact it begins to look like Jane's flight from Rochester.

Benson's prediction comes true, and Leonard turns out to be the instrument of his mother's regeneration. Through her motherly love and devotion to the child, and in her sincere wish to prevent her past from affecting his future life and happiness, Ruth becomes a different person. The ignorant romantic girl of the past becomes a serious student, a loving and kind mother and a self-dependent

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1. Basch, p.248.

governess. Her feminine virtue develops through motherhood, and in her love and care for the future of Leonard, she makes her decision of refusing the offer of marriage. In her refusal she rises above society's expectations.

The pretence of widowhood had protected Ruth in her plight from the harsh "biting world". It had given her time to recover and work out her regeneration and redemption. When Ruth achieves this, the pretence is not needed any more. Her sin becomes known to the world and Ruth starts to demonstrate her redemption publicly.

An epidemic strikes the town, and while:

The customary staff of matrons and nurses had been swept off in two days—and the nurses belonging to the Infirmary had shrunk from being drafted into the pestilential fever-ward—when high wages had failed to tempt any to what, in their panic, they considered as certain death(33:421).

Ruth volunteers as a matron to the fever-ward. She lives among disease and woe with a calm and bright face. Her heroic act accomplishes her social rehabilitation. She is accepted and respected. An onlooker says about her:

"Such a one as her has never been a great sinner; nor does she do her work as a penance, but for the love of God, and of the blessed Jesus. She will be in the light of God's countenance when you and I will be standing afar off"(33:425).

The device of an epidemic which Mrs Gaskell contrives helps to exhibit Ruth's redemption. She is readmitted into society without a disguise or through falsehood, and she is accepted and respected. Even Bradshaw the inflexible Pharisee who is "the embodiment of conventional

standards"<sup>1</sup>, who had denounced her as "fallen and depraved" and expelled her from his house as "contaminating", forgives her. We close the book with him leading Leonard and comforting him for her death showing a genuine and sincere tolerance, and to his old friend, Mr Benson, he can not speak "for the sympathy which choked up his voice, and filled his eyes with tears"(36:454).

Ruth comes in line with Mrs Gaskell's other works if we look on it as a didactic novel written for a purpose. Yet we may find it different not only from them but perhaps from the other didactic novels written at that time if we look at the new ideas which Mrs Gaskell put in it. In Mary Barton, Lizzie Leigh and The Well of Pen-Morfa she tries to excite a feeling of pity and sympathy for the fallen woman and pleads for tolerance and forgiveness, while in Ruth, she makes forgiveness for the sinner a duty which society has to fulfil.

Mrs Gaskell's view can be seen in Benson's words to Bradshaw:

"Every woman who, like Ruth, has sinned should be given a chance of self-redemption—and that such a chance should be given in no supercilious or contemptuous manner, but in the spirit of the holy Christ"(27:347-8).

Even the shadowy elements of the plot which lie in the background emphasize this view. Mr Benson's attitude towards Dick, Bradshaw's son, who commits a forgery, is made to exhibit the ideal and the charitable attitude which

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1. Pollard, p.99.

society should take against the wrong-doer, and confirms the book's message and urges "the enforcement of the cardinal principle of the religion of love—the keynote of Christianity—the duty of the forgiveness of sin"<sup>1</sup>.

The other thing which makes Ruth a different book is Mrs Gaskell's attack on "the fallacy of the Victorian classification of women" as "pure" and "fallen"<sup>2</sup>, and her attempt to refute the unexamined traditional assumptions about the depravity of the fallen woman. Her message is put in Benson's words:

not every woman who has fallen is depraved  
.... Is it not time to change some of our  
ways of thinking and acting? (27:347).

Through Ruth Mrs Gaskell undertakes to demonstrate that "a woman can be both fallen and good"<sup>3</sup>.

The stormy reception of the book and the controversy it created among its reviewers is also one of the features which makes Ruth a different book. The praise and admiration that Mrs Gaskell received from Kingsley<sup>4</sup> and a few

1. A.A. Ward, "In Memoriam — Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell", Cornhill Magazine, 29(October 1910), 457.

2. Rubenius, pp.191-2.

3. Cunningham, p.32.

4. Charles Kingsley wrote to Mrs Gaskell praising the work as "too painfully good" and showing his admiration of its authoress: "May God bless you, and help you to write many more great books as you have already written", quoted in A.A. Ward's introduction to Knutsford edition of Ruth, 1966, p.xiii.

other friends could not sooth the pain that Mrs Gaskell felt at the reception of the book. In her reply to a letter of thanks for the gift of a copy of Ruth, she wrote:

I am in a quiver of pain about it. I can't tell you how much I need strength .... I had a terrible fit of crying all Saty. night at the unkind things people were saying.

There was a general outcry against the book from reviewers on both sides. Miriam Allott sums it up as "the enlightened thought Mrs Gaskell too timid, the unenlightened were horrified"<sup>2</sup>. In his preface to Knutsford edition of Ruth (1906), A.A. Ward quotes W.R. Greg's criticism of the book:

She has first imagined a character as pure, pious, and unselfish as poet ever fancied; and described a lapse from chastity as faultless as such a fault can be; and then, with damaging and unfaithful inconsistency, has given in to the world's estimate in such matters, by affirming that the sin committed was of so deep a dye that only a life of atoning and enduring persistence could wipe it out. If she designed to awaken the world's compassion for the ordinary class of betrayed and deserted Magdalenes, the consequences of Ruth's error should not have been made so innocent, nor should Ruth herself have been painted as so perfect. If she intended to describe a saint (as she has done), she should not have held conventional and mysterious language about her as a grievous sinner.

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1. Elizabeth Haldane, Mrs Gaskell and Her Friends (London, 1930), p.63.
  2. Miriam Allott, Elizabeth Gaskell (London, 1960), p.21. Published in "Writers and Their Works" series, number 124.

Greg was not the only writer who showed his dissatisfaction with the book, there were also those who criticized the conventional end of the story and accused Mrs Gaskell of yielding to the moral climate of her age. Ruth's death provoked a protest from Mrs Gaskell's fellow women writers such as Charlotte Brontë<sup>1</sup> and Elizabeth Browning<sup>2</sup> and the criticism of critics of our own time, such as J.G. Sharps who wrote:

Since Mrs Gaskell (and Mr Benson) rescued Ruth from suicide only to attend at her death-bed, the novelist virtually confesses her failure to improve upon Goldsmith's advice to the lovely woman who stoops to folly and finds too late that men betray.<sup>3</sup>

The critics and writers who protested against Ruth's death may have a point against Mrs Gaskell. If we consider Ruth as a didactic book through which Mrs Gaskell wanted to "change" society's way of thinking and acting, then it may be a fault to resort to the traditional end of killing the heroine. Perhaps the novel could have achieved a moral and artistic triumph if it had ended with Ruth's redemption and social rehabilitation.

On the other hand, Mrs Gaskell herself is unforgiving.

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1. Charlotte Brontë wrote to Mrs Gaskell: "yet — hear my protest! Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping"; quoted in C.K. Shorter, The Brontës, Life and Letters (London, 1908), II, 264.

2. Elizabeth Barret Browning wrote to Mrs Gaskell, "was it quite impossible but that your Ruth should die? I had that thought of regret in closing the book" quoted in Letters Addressed to Mrs Gaskell by Celebrated Contemporaries, ed. Ross D. Waller (Manchester, n.d.), p.42.

3. Sharps, p.154.



She is not prepared to accept that society might have been willing to overlook Ruth's offence. Artistically it may be a blemish that she wrings every drop of sentiment she can out of Ruth's death, Leonard's suffering, his pride in her, and his adoption by the local doctor who also happens to be illegitimate. But it probably reinforces the didactic force of her work.

It is, of course, not simply about Ruth herself. We always feel the pressure of society on her. Yet the behaviour of those about her in society is unrelentingly shown. Bellingham is a hypocrite; Bradshaw is a political hypocrite; Bradshaw's daughter is shown to be even more passionate in nature, and more thoughtless than Ruth, although her problems are resolved; Bradshaw's son is a thief. It is this which helps to give form to the work.

In her letter to her sister-in-law, Mrs Gaskell wrote:

"I could have put much more power, but that I wanted to keep it quiet in tone, lest by the slightest exaggeration, or over-strained sentiment I might weaken the force of what I had to say"<sup>1</sup>.

By avoiding "exaggeration" or, in other words, deviating from the expected logical end of the story Mrs Gaskell wanted to make her book convincing and win the public opinion approval. But her compromise did not stop the public attack and the regret even of some of her friends.

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1. Quoted in Rubenius, p.193.

The criticism and unkind things she heard about her book made her compare herself to "St. Sebastian tied to a tree to be shot at with arrows"<sup>1</sup>. She wrote to one of her friends:

"Now should you have burned the first volume of Ruth as so very bad, even if you had been a very anxious father of a family? Yet two men have and a third has forbidden his wife to read it — they sit next to us in Chapel and you can't think how improper I feel under their eyes"<sup>2</sup>.

Certainly Mrs Gaskell, herself, had a practical knowledge of the problem that she wrote about; and she consulted Dickens about how some of her own "protégées" might be helped to start a new life. For Dickens's concern with the reformation of such women also did not stop at the theoretical level. It has been said that it is

a mistake to suppose that the sentimental emotionalism of the scenes in Oliver Twist, The Chimes, David Copperfield and Little Dorrit went with an actual incapacity on Dickens's part to face the problem of prostitution in an entirely practical manner in real life.<sup>3</sup>

He spent much of his time for many years organizing and running a reformatory home for "the fallen women" with the financial support of Miss Burdett Coutts. The idea

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1. Quoted in Haldane, p.62.

2. Quoted in Dullemen, pp.204-5.

3. K.J. Fielding, "Charles Dickens and The Ruffian" English, 10(1954-55), 92.

of the home was to "take off the streets any women who sincerely wished to escape from such a life, clean up their manners and morals, and ship them off to the colonies".<sup>1</sup>

David Copperfield was published in 1850, at a time when Dickens was involved with the rescue work of the women at Urania Cottage. According to the chronological order which I have so far followed, it should have been looked at before Mrs Gaskell's Ruth (1853). Yet, I kept it to the final part of this chapter because it seems to me not only an advance on Dickens's treatment of the subject in early books, but because it embodies the more advanced view of eighteen-fifties on this problem. We, should note, as well, that I am passing over the part played by Alice Marwood, in Dombey and Son. She is also a victim; and although, at first, she wishes to take vengeance on her seducer, herself, she dies in an atmosphere of Christian forgiveness.

Emily is the conventional seduced girl and Martha is the conventional prostitute, yet they both escape the "traditional" end to which most writers at that time, who wrote about the subject, dragged their fallen women. In fact we find a great similarity between the story of Emily's seduction and Esther's fall in Mary Barton. Emily is a frivolous poor girl who falls into the trap of seduction

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1. K.J. Fielding, Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction (London, 1965), p.125.

as a result of a step she takes on a false way to fulfil her childish aspirations.

From the early chapters of the story and in her first meeting with David, Emily shows her dissatisfaction with her position as the orphan niece of a fisherman and tells David of her dream of becoming a lady so that she might give her uncle:

a sky-blue coat with diamond buttons, nankeen trousers, a red velvet waistcoat, a cocked hat, a large gold watch, a silver pipe, and a box of money".<sup>1</sup>

Some\_what like Esther, Emily finds in Steerforth the means of fulfilling her dreams. She elopes with him and swears never to return if he has not made her a lady. On the Continent, Emily is abandoned after her seduction, and she comes to London with no other alternative but to follow the traditional path of prostitution. Up to this point, we see that Dickens follows the stereotyped situation of the time portrayed in fiction, verse and melodrama. The new thing about the book is Dickens's departure from the traditional end awaiting the seduced girl. Emily's seduction does not result in condemnation and ostracism which leads to prostitution. Her uncle's attitude after her elopement and "fall" is unconventional. Instead of expelling her from the family circle, he devotes his life to finding and saving her. Through his

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1. David Copperfield, (Penguin edition, 1979), p.85. All subsequent references are in the text.

love, Emily is saved, and Dickens makes the redemptive power through which Emily is redeemed.

From the early chapters in the novel, we see that Emily is portrayed as a mixture of goodness and weakness. Her weakness is exhibited in her frivolity, coquetry and dissatisfaction with her condition. Though she likes David, yet she teases and torments him constantly, and when he professes his love for her, she laughs and calls him "a silly boy", but she does it so charmingly that David loves her more. She entertains the idea of becoming a lady from her early childhood, and the scene in which she tells David of her dreams bears a relevant indication of her future life. In fact we see that:

Emily's seduction, or "fall", had been planned from the first number when she told David she wanted to be a lady and ran out along the baulk of timber overhanging the water .<sup>1</sup>

Her love for her uncle and her own people represents the good side of her character which awakes the public sympathy. Being a lady means not only position, but wealth. Her ambition for this does not spring from a selfish interest, but out of a sincere desire to be able to help her uncle and her own around her. She tells David:

I should like it very much. We would all be gentlefolks together, then. Me, and, uncle, and Ham, and Mrs Gummidge. We wouldn't mind then, when there comes stormy weather. - Not for our own sakes, I mean.

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1. Fielding, p.133.

We would for the poor fishermen's, to be sure, and we'd help 'em with money when they come to any hurt (3:85).

In the letter which she leaves for her family she tells of her torment and expresses her feeling of shame and remorse:

Oh, if you knew how my heart is torn. If even you, that I have wronged so much, that never can forgive me, could only know what I suffer! I am too wicked to write about myself. Oh, take comfort in thinking that I am so bad. Oh, for mercy's sake, tell uncle that I never loved him half so dear as now (31:513-4).

On the verge of being driven into a life of prostitution Emily is saved. She emigrates to Australia with the family where she leads a penitent life of service to mankind.

Through Martha, the street walker, Dickens wants to warn "of the fate awaiting any girl taking the first step to the abyss: prostitution"<sup>1</sup>. We see that his treatment of Martha is also different from the traditional treatment at the time. Though Martha is a "fallen woman" like Nancy and Esther, yet she has not to die. In Clara Peggotty's house we find that Martha is associated with the pictures around her of Eve and the Serpent, and Mary Magdalen at the feet of Christ, and we understand that a similar forgiveness for giving way to temptation is in order. In his portrayal of Martha, Dickens summarizes the sympathetic approach that he wishes to convey, and we see that at the end of the novel she repents and reacts favourably, even nobly to

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1. Basch, p.225.

kindness, and is persuaded by her own selfless love for Emily, to seek her out and save her from the depths to which she has fallen. She is no longer an outcast, she is given another chance. Society reclaims her or half reclaims her. She emigrates to Australia, where she can find a lover to marry her, so that she can lead a worthwhile life. Though Martha marries, ~~but~~ Emily chooses a life of repentant spinsterhood and good works. "Clearly", says Philip Collins, "one is intended to admire Emily's resolution (and her loyalty to Ham) more than Martha's earthier pursuit of happiness"<sup>1</sup>.

Once again, we might argue, that the novel is a strange mixture of the conventional and the unconventional. There is no doubt that the novel was written for a purpose. We could tell this even without Dickens's letter to Miss Burdett Coutts (4 Feb. 1850), in which he wrote that he would be glad to discuss the running of the Home with her, and how the problems that there were in dealing with "fallen women" might be dealt with, perhaps in the forthcoming Household Words. He then went on:

It is difficult to approach, in pages that are intended for readers of all classes and all ages of life; but I have not the least misgiving about being able to bring people gently to its consideration. You will observe that I am endeavouring to turn their thoughts as little that way, in Copperfield.

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1. Collins, p.114.

And I hope before I finish the story,  
to do something strongly suggestive,  
in that kind of preparation.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly his aim was to persuade his readers that the penitent sinner should be genuinely forgiven and allowed to re-enter society. And, in advising on the running of the home, he had always insisted to Miss Coutts that penitence by itself was not enough but that, for most of its residents, it ought to be allied with the possibility of marriage and a normal home life. Philip Collins looks on Dickens as capitulating "in his fiction to the vice he rejected in practice", when he argued that in practice "it is almost impossible to produce a penitence which shall stand the wear and tear of this rough world". Yet perhaps he does not allow enough for Dickens's wary understanding of his broad readership. His treatment of Martha and Emily represents a further step on the way to seeing forgiveness was needed.

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1. Ed. Edgar Johnson, Letters from Charles Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts 1841-1865 (London, 1953), p.165.



## CHAPTER III

## The Image of The Fallen Woman—II

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Mrs Gaskell and Charles Dickens were not the only Victorian writers who dealt with the subject of "the fallen woman". In fact, we notice that the subject appears in the work of many of the famous writers of the period and some minor writers.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I will try to look at the treatment of this subject in Trollope's The Vicar of Bullhampton (1870), and Wilkie Collins's The New Magdalen (1873) and The Fallen Leaves (1879).

In The Vicar of Bullhampton, Trollope tells us the story of Carry Brattle, a fallen woman. Carry is presented as a lovely girl who forgot the sanctity and blessedness of chastity, was led astray through her "false dreams" and awoke to find the reality of life resulted in quite different consequences.

The book was written, as Trollope tells us in his Autobiography, chiefly with the object of "exciting not only pity but sympathy for a fallen woman, and of raising a feeling of forgiveness for such in the minds of other women".<sup>2</sup>

Carry Brattle is not introduced as innately depraved.

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1. Mrs Henry Wood wrote East Lynne (1861), Lady Caroline Norton Lost and Saved (1863), and Mrs Houstoun Recommended to Mercy (1863).

2. Anthony Trollope, An Autobiography (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1947), p.273.

On her face:

There were still streaks of pink,—a soft, laughing face it had been once, and still there was a gleam of light in the eyes that told of past merriment, and almost promised mirth to come, if only some great evil might be cured.<sup>1</sup>

Though "vice laid its heavy hand upon her", Carry is not thoroughly hardened. "The glory and the brightness, and the sweet outward flavour of innocence, had not altogether departed from her"(25:172). The mixture between "the heavy hand" of "vice" and "the sweet outward flavour of innocence" is important. It sums up Trollope's humanitarian attitude towards her.

Trollope makes a conscious effort to give a realistic presentation of the subject and to develop the theme in a manner to avoid shocking any sensitive nature. And this is the reason why many critics have tended to consider the book as possibly the most sensible picture of the subject drawn in the nineteenth century.

Though his attitude towards Carry is similar to Mrs Gaskell's sympathetic attitude towards Ruth, and though he also sets himself against the idea that one false step irrevocably depraves a girl and destroys all "flavour of innocence", yet at the same time, he does not go so far as to outrage conventions. He does not show Carry as rising purified and ennobled, nor does he surround her

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1. The Vicar of Bullhampton (Oxford, 1978), p.172. All subsequent references appear in the text.

with romantic glamour. In his introduction to the book he explains:

To write in fiction of one so fallen as the noblest of her sex, as one to be rewarded because of her weakness, as one whose life is happy, bright and glorious, is certainly to allure to vice and misery (pp.vi-vii).

Trollope's main concern in telling Carry's story is to attack the cruelty of the herd and the fanatical way in which the world with its evaluation of female chastity keeps the sinner from reforming herself and banishes any hope of her leaving her miserable life. Though Carry's false step or mishap had not depraved her nature, it has been said that it had blighted all her hope of a happy future in a society "obsessed with sexual purity" and which "equates it with sanctity"<sup>1</sup>. Nearly everyone in Bullhampton turns against her. All of them "in the name of morality, virtually run to see who can throw the first stone at her"<sup>2</sup>. Carry's brother, Sam, sums up the general attitude towards his sister's sin. The world he says is "down on it, like a dog on a rat" (36:255). Except for him, the mother and the unmarried sister, Carry's family joins in the world's opinion. The old miller, Carry's father, who had broken every bone in the body of his daughter's seducer, turns her out-of-doors although "of all the flock

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1. R.M. Polhemus, The Changing World of Anthony Trollope (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968), p.168.

2. Polhemus, p.168.

she "had been her father's darling"(5:36). She was his daughter, but to him she is now "a thing somewhere never to be mentioned"(5:73).

Like the traditional outcast, Carry loses every hope of future happiness or a meaningful life. There was nothing left to her, as she tells the Vicar, but "to die and have done with it", and bursting out into loud sobs she continues "what's the use o'living"(25:174). She anticipates the future seen by Nancy and Martha Endell, but Carry's Waterloo's Bridge is to be found at her father's mill. She says:

Sometimes I think I'll walk there all the day, and so get there at night, and just look about the old place, only I know I'd drown myself in the mill-stream (25:177).

Yet as usual, Trollope is able to increase the power of his argument on one side of the question by showing that he is at least aware of the arguments that can be put on the other side. From time to time in the course of the novel, he reminds us that there is one strong basis for the way in which society, and the individual in society, treat Carry. If she is punished by society for her misbehaviour, this may have the result that other young women are prevented from making the same mistake. This attitude is shown through the Vicar's wife who under the pressure of "the law of custom" finds it difficult to help Carry or forgive her. She tells her husband "you can't fight against it .... And it is useful. It keeps women from going astray"(39:276).

If Carry Brattle is to have any better fate than the mill-stream, there must be someone willing to give: to help and forgive. Through Fenwick, the Vicar of Bullhampton, Trollope gives us an example. The Vicar, who "never hardened his heart against a sinner, unless the sin implied pretence and falsehood"(25:172), forgives the girl and seeks to help her. When he first sees her, he longs to take her into his arms and show "her that he did not account her to be vile", beg "her to become more good"(25:172). He is the only one who makes her see a ray of hope in her moments of despair. He tells her:

don't drown yourself, Carry, and I'll care for you. Keep your hands clean. You know what I mean, and I will not rest till I find some spot for your weary feet (25:177).

The Vicar's charitable and forgiving attitude towards "the fallen" Carry serves Trollope as a means of attacking the double standard by which society condemns the woman for sexual immorality but silently excuses the man, and of satirizing the lower-middle-class philosophy summed up by George Brattle's words "but a boy as is bad ain't never so bad as a girl"(41:287).

In the Vicar's offer to find Carry an acceptable place in society, Trollope sets himself against the traditional practice of a convenient death which contributed to evasion of reality and became, as he seeks to show in Carry's brother-in-law's reply to the Vicar, a cliché with a familiar solution: "I don't know whether almost

the best thing for 'em isn't to die,—of course after they have repented"(46:331).

Trollope felt that exaggeration would not serve the moral design of his book, and that a realistic portrayal of Carry Brattle lost into a futureless life, denied love and care and shut out from the warmth and affection of those she loves would be more effective than thrusting her into degradation, disease and death. Though her "sin" would not pass unpunished and though "things could not be with her as they would have been had she not fallen", yet society should not close its doors upon her and exaggerate the punishment.

In his introduction to the book Trollope repeats that it may be said that punishment "acts as a protection to female virtue,—detering, as all known punishments do deter, from vice"(vi). But he finds that the punishment society inflicts on its fallen women is repulsive in itself and

of such a nature that it hardly allows room for repentance. How is the woman to return to decency, to whom no decent door is opened? Then comes the answer: It is to the severity of the punishment alone that we can trust to keep women from falling. Such is the argument used in favour of the existing practice, and such is the excuse given for their severity by women who will relax nothing of their harshness. But in truth the severity of the punishment is not known beforehand; it is not in the least understood by women in general, except by those who suffer it. The gaudy dirt, the squalid plenty, the contumely of familiarity, the absence of all good words and all good things ... hunger, thirst, and strong drink, life without a hope, without the certainty even of a morrow's breakfast,

utterly friendless, disease, starvation, and a quivering fear of that coming hell which still can hardly be worse than all that is suffered here! This is the life to which we doom our erring daughters, when because of error we close our door upon them!<sup>1</sup>

Prompted by a humanitarian feeling towards the fallen Carry, Trollope deliberately seeks to create some degree of sympathy and forgiveness for her. The Vicar does not only look at her sin as forgivable, he also tries to diminish the importance society attaches to it. He tells, the old miller, Carry's father:

If you will stretch forth your hand, you may save her .... Think how easy it is for a poor girl to fall,—how great is the temptation and how quick, and how it comes without knowledge of the evil that is to follow! How small is the sin, and how terrible the punishment! Your friends, Mr Brattle, have forgiven you worse sins than ever she has committed (27:191).

When he referred to the subject in his Autobiography, Trollope wrote "I have myself forgotten what the heroine does and says—except that she tumbles into a ditch"<sup>2</sup>. In his endeavour to lower the emotional temperature of the subject, he shows Carry Brattle, the fallen woman, only after she has been seduced and deserted. He exhibits her desperate state and succeeds in conveying the aimlessness of her life, and the emptiness of her hours, after society has rejected her. He deliberately refuses to show the

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1. An Autobiography, pp.276-7.

2. An Autobiography, p.276.

temptation-part of the theme, and the incident loses its force from the very fact of its being reported instead of enacted.

The Vicar's human charity serves to illustrate Trollope's message behind the book. It is a call for love and forgiveness especially for those whose blind belief in "the law of custom"(39:276) could not bring them to forgive. Trollope makes it clear throughout the book that we are all apt to sin, there can not be much difference between Carry Brattle and the rest of us, and Christ has set us a supreme example of forgiveness to follow.

Like Mrs Gaskell, Trollope makes human love and sympathy the redemptive power which has a greater power than the institutional charity. He explicitly rejects the idea of "a refuge" or "a house of correction". Carry Brattle refuses the idea of living in such a place "along with a lot of others", and she tells the Vicar "Oh, Mr Fenwick, I could not stand that"(25:177). The Vicar promises not to place her there, for he also believes that Carry should be placed at her home where she can respond to the tender affection of her sister and to "her mother's softness as well as to her mother's care"(40:283).

Through the Vicar's compassionate humanity and kind efforts, the girl is reinstated at home, and through her own sweetness which has not been completely rooted out by sin, Carry wins back the forgiveness of her hard and



stubborn father.

Fenwick's charitable attitude towards Carry is similar to Benson's, the minister in Mrs Gaskell's Ruth. He also suffers because of his compassion and sympathy for "the fallen" Carry. His visits to her were talked about and raised suspicion and allegations of immorality. Like Benson, Fenwick believes that Carry's "sin can be washed away as well as other sin"(36:255). We notice that though both of them treat the ostracised victims of seduction with the most generous charity and sympathy, they show their indignation against the seducers and find it difficult to forgive them. Mr Benson shuts his door in Bellingham's face and indignantly refuses financial help for Leonard's education, while Fenwick says that if he gets hold of Carry's seducer he will leave "him without a sound limb within his skin", or even "nearly without a skin at all"(40:283). He believes in her brother's, Sam, inherent honesty, goes bail for him, and pleads that Sam should be given a chance.

Though the story of the murder and Sam's arrest may seem irrelevant to Carry's story, it serves to show the Vicar's compassionate nature and charitable love. At the same time, it keeps the story going and brings the Vicar more closely into relation with the Brattles. If it is so, then what can we say about the other plots of the book? The Saturday Review said that the book was

not a unity<sup>1</sup>, and this is something that we could notice without its critic's help. But this does raise a critical question of some interest; and perhaps<sup>the</sup> observation that there is more than one strand to the plot is significant, and perhaps the question of how Mary Lowther, or Mr Fenwick and the Marquis, and Carry Brattle can be related except in the loosest way is that they are all entwined round the Vicar of Bullhampton himself, and yet are almost independent of his own story.

Of course what is obvious is, that any single strand in the story would have been too insubstantial for a novel on its own. Trollope would not allow himself (and had not the nerve) to treat the story of Carry with the detail that would have been needed if it had really been so important to him as he suggests, and if it had taken up the whole novel. Therefore he combines it with the conventional love-story of the heroine, Mary Lowther, which is rather boring, because we seem to have heard something like it before from Trollope. And the story of the Vicar and the Marquis is relatively slight though amusing. Yet, whether a reader thinks the novel unified or not, I think it is possible that Trollope has cleverly woven together the different strands of the novel. It is

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1. Anthony Trollope: The Critical Heritage, ed. D. Smalley (London, 1969), p.336.

difficult to see how it is. Yet taken together, they are well-balanced. Can it be that a novel does not in fact require every element to be closely related, or can it be that there is a relationship between the three stories which we do not at first perceive? The questions are worth asking and answering.

We can say that all three strands of plot are related to the society in which they unravel themselves. Mary Lowther's situation arises out of her prospects in life, and the family relationships and financial stability of her two lovers. In Mary's episode, Trollope shows us the plight of a girl who cannot marry the man of her choice because of lack of money. Mary Lowther wavers between a poor lover and a rich suitor for whom she feels no love. She breaks her engagement and shakes herself free from a loveless marriage, and accepts her favoured lover. Then, all comes square when the poor favourite lover inherits an unexpected inheritance. Though Mary Lowther was condemned by some contemporary readers at the time for fickleness in love as Michael Sadlier says "today she seems sensible enough and, as a young woman, wholly natural"<sup>1</sup>. Reviewers may have been cool about her, but Trollope obviously wishes us to approve of her because she is true to the ideal of love: not simply an ideal, but "rationally" justified if a woman is to consent to live with a man for the rest of her life. The story of

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1. Michael Sadlier, Trollope: A Commentary (London, 1945), p.398.

the Vicar and the Marquis is very much rooted in social relationships; in addition, we see the Vicar's family life, his status, the kind of Christianity he teaches, and so on. One element of interest lies in the way his duties as a clergyman and Christian conflict with his spirit as a man; and one can even say the same of the Marquis, who is not a bad man—since in the end he does the right thing. In its slightly vague way, it may be that this is what is in common between all three stories: how the characters reconcile their human inclinations, with some difficulty, with what is right.

The book did not bring strong reactions from the press, and we notice from what Donald Smalley tells us that apparently no-one was deeply disturbed<sup>1</sup>. One reviewer thought Trollope went a little too far; but it is slightly surprising that others were clear that the novel was perfectly innocuous even for young ladies<sup>2</sup>.

What distinguishes The Vicar of Bullhampton from similar books is Trollope's common-sense treatment of the problem. He goes as far as his readers will accept. In fact, it is his principle, that we should act as society about us permits, and not force the issue. Though the novel was meant to excite pity and sympathy for the fallen woman, it can also be seen as a "hard-headed attack on the counter-productive tendencies of

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1. See D. Smalley, p.335.

2. See D. Smalley, p.338.

well-meaning sentimentality".<sup>1</sup> Contrary to the sensational fashion of the sixties, Carry is neither an idealized figure nor a ruined angel, nor a heroine to be admired. In his Autobiography, Trollope explains "I could not venture to make this female the heroine of my story. To have made her a heroine at all would have been directly opposed to my purpose".<sup>2</sup> She is an ordinary girl, who gains our sympathy through the compassion of human fellowship and brotherhood. Trollope is conscious of the situation he puts her in. He does not deny the sinfulness of unchastity. He makes it clear at the end of the novel that Carry's sin has cost her great deal, that her life's happiness is to be found as her parents' child. She even knows that "no lover" will "come and ask her to establish with him a homestead of their own"(73:527). Life for her can never be the same, she is somewhat like Hetty Sorrel who made the "bread" of the Poysers "bitter".

Yet if sin deprives her of what might have been a pleasant life, it should not deprive her almost of life itself. It should not push her into a horrible life of futureless prostitution or drive her to starve, or die in a ditch.

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1. Eric Trudgill, Madonnas and Magdalens: The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes (London, 1976), p.302.

2. An Autobiography, p.273.

Margaret Hewitt, a British sociologist writing on the role of women in the nineteenth century, states her reasons for choosing Trollope as her most valuable fictional source of information about Victorian women:

unlike the contemporaries, he sought to make his effect not by embroidering fantasies on a ground of experience, like Dickens, nor by imposing moral order on experience, like Thackeray, nor by distorting in the mirror of his own individuality, like Charlotte Brontë; but simply by reproducing experience as exactly as possible. If we were transported back to the mid-Victorian era, particularly the earlier years of that epoch, since nothing seemed so desirable to him as the status quo of his youth, we should find the world not like the world of Vanity Fair and David Copperfield, but like the world of Phineas Finn and Barchester Towers".<sup>1</sup>

This is somewhat a simplistic view, for all these novelists write fiction. No novelists "simply reproduce experience". But Trollope comes close to it; his aim is often to appear to do so; and it is one of the reasons why we value his work.

(ii)

Three years after the appearance of Trollope's The Vicar of Bullhampton, Wilkie Collins published his book The New Magdalen (1873). The novel is about a young woman, who feels forced by poverty to earn her living on the streets, who seizes a desperate chance to

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1. Margaret Hewitt, "Anthony Trollope: Historian and Sociologist", British Journal of Sociology 14(Sept. 1963), 227.

rehabilitate herself in the eyes of society, and about her eventual reformation at the hands of a clergyman who is in love with her. We notice the extent to which the treatment of "the fallen woman" has changed in Victorian fiction between the 1830s and 1870s. Though Mercy Merrick is "a fallen woman", and though her sins are not less than those of Martha's or Nancy's, she is no longer the Magdalen doomed to a life of misery. Collins colours his scenes and directs the incidents of his plot in such a way that his readers will not only tolerate her but regard her with sympathy and admiration.

Though the title of the book suggests its content, and though the association of "Magdalen" may call up the traditional "Magdalen subject" of the period, what stirs our curiosity is the epithet "new". Collins obviously wishes to claim for his Magdalen that she is "new", and to be judged in a new way, but this is only partly true.

There is no need to tell the story of the novel, but we can ask ourselves what are the characteristics of this new "Magdalen". First, she has only two sins to account for. One of them, perhaps we must admit, is remarkable enough: for although her sins are all in the past, she has more or less unequivocally been a prostitute. The word is never mentioned. It is explained that it was her misfortune rather than her fault. Nevertheless, by chapter 27, "Magdalen's Apprenticeship", the facts are fairly clear. She has passed from being an orphan, a child actor, living

with gypsies, begging, being a needlewoman, seduced when drugged, and living with women "whose faces betrayed" their "shameless infamy"(27:340)<sup>1</sup>, to drifting "into the life which set a mark on me for the rest of my days"(27:342).

Her other fault is that she impersonates a woman whom she believes dead in order to escape from her past. This, in fact, is so accounted for that it can hardly be said to be wrong, and the temptation to keep her new false identity even when the woman she has displaced appears, is merely described with understanding.

Apart from this, Mercy Merrick, the heroine of the book is extremely conventional. Her career follows the traditional path of the prostitute, and from her confession we hear that before resorting to prostitution, she was a fallen woman and that she lost her chastity.

When we turn to her character, we find that it is also close to the traditional type. Mercy is a basically attractive woman; she is described as "tall, lithe and graceful". There

was an innate nobility in the carriage of this woman's head, an innate grandeur in the gaze of her large grey eyes, and in the lines of her finely-proportioned face, which made her irresistibly striking and beautiful, seen under any circumstances and clad in any dress (1:7).

Collins endows her with every quality to appeal to his

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1. The New Magdalen (Library Edition, 1899), All subsequent references appear in the text.



readers' admiration. In addition to her physical beauty, Mercy is also shown as sensitive, brave and concerned for others. She refuses to leave the wounded soldiers she is nursing, and tells them "I will be with you when the Germans come"(4:32), and they call her "their guardian angel"(4:32).

Her personality is quite as conventional as her physical nature. She is full of self-pity and self-contempt. Her meeting with Grace Roseburry not only recalls Esther's meeting with Jim, and Nancy's with Rose Maylie, in fact, it is a stereotyped situation used to show the prostitute's self-contempt and shame. Mercy shrinks away from Grace's sympathetic hand in the same way that Esther draws back from Mary Barton's attempt to kiss her. Like Martha and Nancy, she is portrayed as "a shadowy figure" who crouches on a chest in a dark "corner of the room"(1:9). When she prepares to tell her story, she asks Grace to move away still further and, in an atmosphere of total darkness, when "the room was buried in obscurity" and "the darkness fell on the two women," Mercy starts the tale of the past.

Her self-pity and shame is mixed with "suppressed suffering and sorrow"(1:7). She loses every hope of improving her condition: "what I am can never alter what I was"(2:16), "society can't take me back"(2:15). Like Carry, who thinks of the mill-stream as an end to her trouble and misery, Mercy is not afraid of the artillery barrage, merely remarking "why should I be afraid of losing my life?", "I have nothing worth living for"(3:25).

Her suffering and misery have not spoiled her good nature nor hardened her heart. When her eyes fell on the child brought to the house, her heart "hungering in its horrible isolation for something that it might harmlessly love", she welcomed the rescued waif of the street. She caught the little creature in her arms and whispered "in the reckless agony" "kiss me", "call me sister" (29:372).

As we have seen in the previous novels of the fallen woman's life is dealt with more or less from before her fall to her death or emigration. In fact we notice that most writers shrink from telling or describing the "falling state" itself, and so usually use the past tense to refer to the loss of chastity.

When we turn to The New Magdalen we find that even Collins uses the same convention. Mercy is a reformed prostitute throughout the present time of the novel, while her history up to the time of her "fall" is merely part of the past. Commenting on this point Robert Ashley wrote:

Although Collins was capable of greater candour than most of his contemporaries, nevertheless his treatment of Mercy's past is clouded with characteristic Victorian vagueness. He tells us a little about Mercy's life before she "fell" and after she "rose", but nothing about her "fallen" state. In other words, Collins's treatment of the fallen woman problem suffers from the same weakness as his treatment of athleticism in Man and Wife: we know too little of the past of the thesis characters to readily accept Collins's conclusions as valid.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Robert Ashley, Wilkie Collins (London, 1952), p.114.

The convention of disguise is also part of Mercy's career. In this respect, Mercy is nearer to Ruth than Nancy and Esther. For though Nancy and Esther play roles, we notice that they resort to it when they want to do good and appear in front of respectable society. Once their missions are over they take off their masks. But in Mercy's case we notice that like Ruth, she disguises herself to escape once and for all from what she is.

What distinguishes Collins's use of this device is that Collins shapes the entire novel around it. It gives rise to the major conflict in the story, and the climax of the novel occurs when the heroine removes her mask. In making the disguise-scene and Mercy's ensuing confession the focal point of the novel Collins could vividly show the unforgiving attitude of society. Disguised as Grace Roseburry, Mercy is able to live a happy life as the adopted daughter of Lady Janet, and Horace's fiancée. When she drops her mask and reveals the truth, Horace breaks from her and Lady Janet finds it difficult to forgive her. Mercy's effort to tell the truth deprives her of everything she has and leaves her back where she was at the beginning of the novel but without even the employment of nursing that had earned the respect and love of the wounded men for the woman they called an "angel" (4:34). In fact one can read in The New Magdalen almost exactly the arguments that Hardy was to bring forward nearly twenty years later with Tess of the D'Urbervilles.

Mercy is admirable for her own nature. In a sense, she is as much a pure woman as Tess. We see less of the men with whom she has had to associate early in life; but she has a suitor and fiancé, Horace, who cannot accept her when he learns the truth, although she is rewarded by marriage to the Rev. Julian Gray. A generation before Hardy was to concern himself with the same issue, Collins has found in personal worth the true standard, and has fastened the blame for our unwillingness to accept this on "society".

What partly distinguishes Collins's heroine is her sexual attractiveness which plays a major role in her reclamation. Julian Gray, after seeing her only once and briefly talking to her, confesses that he has fallen in love at first sight. He tells Lady Janet "I think of her morning, noon, and night. I see her and hear her .... She has made her-self a part of my-self"(13:152). At their second meeting Julian thinks "if I look at her again ... I shall fall at her feet and own that I am in love with her!"(16:185). At the time of her confession to him, she asks to take his hand, and the touch of her hand produces in him a physical response:

The soft clasp of her fingers, clinging round his, roused his senses, fired his passion for her, swept out of his mind the pure aspirations which had filled it but the moment before, paralysed his perception when it was just penetrating the mystery of her disturbed manner and her strange words. All the man in him trembled under the rapture of her touch (17:199).

In emphasizing the heroine's explicit power of sexuality and the minister's weakness and vulnerability, Collins possibly risked spoiling the moral design of his book. Julian Gray's loving and forgiving attitude towards Mercy seems to come in response to the allurement of her physical charm rather than from an intrinsic Christian charity. In his study of Wilkie Collins's life, Nuel Pharr Davis writes that Wilkie Collins's "aversion to religion—all religions—grew more settled throughout his life. In his stories, almost no clergyman or devout person is presented without ridicule"<sup>1</sup>. Yet, in Collins's eyes, of course, the Rev. Julian Gray's passionate and romantic infatuation is seen as a redeeming feature. If we could believe that Collins knew what he was doing and that he did it deliberately, we might regard him as a serious novelist; but, in his own way, he is at least conventional as any of Mudie's library novelists.

Contrary to the previous novels, Mercy Merrick, the fallen woman, does not show a religious conversion and a commitment to a life of atonement and penance, and we may feel with Norman Page that:

it is Mercy Merrick's beautiful figure and "grand head" which constitute her saving grace, and influence Julian Gray, and this conviction kills the moral of the story at once. The author's pen was too human for his theme<sup>2</sup>.

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1. Nuel Pharr Davis, The Life of Wilkie Collins (Urbana, 1956), p.19.

2. Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage, ed. Norman Page (London and Boston, 1974), p.277.

Though Collins has his occasional moments in which he is able to make some points against a society which ignored the fallen woman "in her need and then spurned her because of the sin its indifference drove her to"<sup>1</sup>, yet his book fails to be persuasive. He exaggerates in praising his redeemed Magdalen and overwhelms the book with sentimentality. He even makes "the fallen woman" greatly superior in character to the respectable society.

On the one hand, Grace Roseburry, the respectable woman is made vengeful, vindictive, narrow and unfeeling. On the other, "the fallen" Mercy Merrick is marvellously beautiful, courageous, tender-hearted, sympathetic and generous. Julian Gray sees her as one of God's noblest creatures. He says to her: "Rise, poor wounded heart! Beautiful, purified soul, God's angels rejoice over you! Take your place among the noblest of God's creatures!" (28:350). Commenting on the failure of the book,

Kenneth Robinson is of opinion that Collins

Insisted on weighting the scales so heavily in favour of the reformed prostitute as to destroy any illusion of impartiality, and his plea thus loses much of its effectiveness<sup>2</sup>.

Yet for all its false plot, false rhetoric, and superficial characterization, there is something alive at the heart of the novel, which gives it a spark of life.

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1. Reed, p.68.

2. Kenneth Robinson, Wilkie Collins: A Biography (London, 1951), p.261.

Nor is Collins quite silly as he has often been said to be.

Collins takes up the theme again in The Fallen Leaves and offers a similar point of view. The book tells the story of a young prostitute rescued by a charitable member of a fictional community called "Primitive Christian Socialists". Simple Sally, the heroine of the book, is a girl "barely passed the boundary between childhood and girlhood"<sup>1</sup>, and has been taken advantage of by a "wild beast on two legs" (Bk.6,1:177). He sends her on the street to make money by prostitution, and beats her if she fails to bring home enough money to keep him in liquor. Despite her horrible career, starvation, frequent beating and filth, the appearance of the girl:

was artlessly virginal and innocent; she looked as if she had passed through the contamination of the streets without being touched by it, without fearing it, or feeling it, or understanding it. Robed in pure white, with her gentle blue eyes raised to heaven, a painter might have shown her on his canvas as a saint or an angel; and the critical world would have said, Here is the true ideal—Raphael himself might have painted this! (Bk.6,1:164-5).

Though the attitude of Amelius, the hero, towards Simple Sally takes a conventional shape and, at a certain stage, recalls the relationship between Mr Benson and Ruth, yet later in the book, we notice that Collins breaks

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1. The Fallen Leaves (London, 1879), Bk.6,1:163. All subsequent references appear in the text.

away from it and seems partly aware of idealizing the relationship between the saviour and the saved.

Amelius is introduced as a "primitive Christian Socialist" whose principles lie in "the spirit of the New Testament—not in the letter"(Bk.1,2:74).

Prompted by his belief in universal love, he seeks to help the lost girl and save her from her horrid career. His first response towards Sally, the child-prostitute of the book is impersonal and is mainly the outcome of his charitable and kind nature. When he feels lonely and longs for his dog and his fawn, Amelius finds

the martyred creature from the streets,  
whom he had rescued from nameless horror,  
waiting to be his companion, servant,  
friend! There was the child-victim ...  
innocent of all other aspirations, so  
long as she might fill the place which  
had once been occupied by the dog and  
the fawn!(Bk.7,2:39).

Amelius's love remains purely spiritual as long as Sally remains a child. But Collins does not keep the relation at this level. Later in the book, we see that the child grows into an intelligent woman. She tells Amelius: "I'm afraid you'll get tired of me. There's nothing about me to make you pity me now"(Bk.8,5:188). She becomes more than a creature for Amelius to take care of. She develops into a woman who needs not just charity but human love, and she seeks this love in Amelius.

If Mercy Merrick in The New Magdalen does not show a religious conversion or undertake a commitment to a life of atonement and spiritual penance, in The Fallen Leaves



Collins takes a step further. In Simple Sally, the fallen woman, we not only notice the absence of the Magdalen's remorse and feelings of shame and self-contempt, in fact, she shows no concern for any heavenly reward. She has "heard of Heaven, attainable on the hard condition of first paying the debt of death" (Bk.8,5:181), but she takes no heed of that heaven, for, she says:

I have found a kinder Heaven .... It is here  
in the cottage; and Amelius has shown me the  
way to it" (Bk.8,5:181).

Her "paradise" is "earthly" and she could find it in the little cottage with Amelius.

Amelius finally responds to Sally's physical attraction and the good-night kiss between them becomes a kiss of passion:

he was young—he was a man—for a moment  
he lost his self-control; he kissed her  
as he had never kissed her yet (Bk.8,6:209).

The virgin Regina to whom Amelius is engaged offers a cold spiritual love without accompanying passion, while Sally is capable of demonstrating passionate feelings and physical attraction. She initiates kisses and Amelius gradually comes to "prefer this simple and direct young woman to the more sophisticated, but inhibited Regina"<sup>1</sup>. Like Mercy Merrick, Simple Sally wins the heart of Amelius who leaves the respectable Regina and marries her. We hear him late in the novel say "her happiness is more

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1. Reed, p.69.

precious to me than words can say. She is sacred to me"  
(Bk.8,8:237).

Amelius's charity is a mixture of love and pity and Sally's redemptive power is purity mixed with sexuality. Thus we see that the prostitute whom victimization could associate with purity and about whom it was possible to think sexual thoughts becomes an object of both pity and desire. Amelius's "choice of Sally over Regina implies a preference for passionate directness over the safe and respectable frigidity associated with Victorian ladies"<sup>1</sup>, yet also a sentimental preference for the simple and grateful childlike and adoring woman, as sentimental and conventional in her way as any Victorian heroine.

At the end of the book Collins mentions a "second series " of Fallen Leaves which will be about the married life of Amelius, but the cold and even hostile reception which his first series met must have stopped him. Kenneth Robinson finds that:

One or two scenes stand out on their own merits .... For the rest, the story seldom emerges from a morass of novelettish mediocrity. The Fallen Leaves must stand as the low-water mark of Wilkie's achievement.<sup>2</sup>

While Robert Ashley finds the book "a pretty silly book and

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1. Reed, p.69.

2. Robinson, pp.292-3.

continues his criticism saying:

Little could be expected of a novel with a hero named Claude Amelius Goldenheart, a street-walking heroine with a web foot and a retarded intellect, a comic American who puts shaving soap instead of pomatum in his hair, and a frustrated mother who swings dumb-bells and smokes cigars<sup>1</sup>.

The New Magdalen and The Fallen Leaves are both unVictorian and Victorian, and though it is extraordinary that Collins managed to present his views in a popular form, they remind us that what we so often think of as conventionally Victorian, only covered a fairly narrow cultural range.

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1. Ashley, p.115.

## CHAPTER IV

## The Image of the Passionate Woman

In many Victorian novels we notice the existence of another woman who shows the opposite qualities to those of the traditional heroine. Although this chapter concerns itself primarily with this type of female character, it may be useful to start by drawing the distinction between what appears to have been regarded as these two classes of women in literature.

On the one hand, there is the traditional heroine, the submissive girl so well illustrated by Richardson's Pamela, but whose literary archetypes may go back even to Griselda and Penelope. This type is virtuous, obedient, patient and is usually cast as the faithful wife or mother. On the other hand, we have the imperious women characters whose antecedents are possibly Clytemnestra or Cleopatra and who are usually cast in a "passionate" or "spirited" role.

These two types apparently sometimes go under different archetypal names, such as "Mary and Eve" or even "lilies and roses", and they reflect, in essence, society's two different images of women which Hazel Mews has described as "on the one hand" a woman seen "with suspicion as a temptress and a siren, and on the other "seen as a tender or holy virgin"<sup>1</sup>.

Almost invariably the two types were seen as having

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1. Mews, p.5.

a definite physical make-up. The submissive virgin is usually blond and passive, and has been referred to as "the lass with the delicate air"<sup>1</sup>. Contrasted with her is the darker complexioned, and more sensual woman, who may show aggression and even cunning. It does not follow that she may not be a perfectly virtuous heroine, in her own right; but her charms are also sometimes used to enable her to survive in a male-oriented world.

The general literary tradition, as Utter and Needham rather light-heartedly describe it, was "that the fair-haired maiden is an angel, and if anything less than angelic is to be done, the nut-brown maiden must do it"<sup>2</sup>. The contrast between these two types, the "Griselda" and the "Clytemnestra" appears in its most simplistic form in ballads, popular poetry and minor fiction; but it also shows itself in some of the great novels of the age as well, and may remind us how their authors sought to reach a wide public many of whom were familiar with fiction only in quite simple forms. The dark-haired Maggie Tulliver found it a convention of the novel, and was impatient with it, and told Philip Wakem why she had not finished reading Corinne:

As soon as I came to the blonde-haired young lady reading in the park, I shut it up, and determined to read no further. I foresaw that that light-complexioned girl would win all the love from Corinne and make her

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1. R.P. Utter & G.B. Needham, Pamela's Daughters (London, 1937), p.169.

2. Utter & Needham, p.201.

miserable. I'm determined to read no more books where the blonde-haired women carry away all the happiness. I should begin to have a prejudice against them. If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance. I want to avenge Rebecca, and Flora MacIvor, and Minna and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones<sup>1</sup>.

As we might expect, the early Victorians at least were uneasy at reading about the "passionate" type of women, and they were nearly always portrayed as outside the normal circle of domesticity. They could neither be good mothers, good wives or good daughters and almost all of them suffer, in one way or another, from crippled femininity. In her comment on this type, Jenni Calder writes that

passionate women are profoundly discontented. They cannot win happiness; the comfort of hearth and home with which the good women are rewarded ... cannot be theirs. They destroy themselves ... as if their passionate nature exiled them from a normal life<sup>2</sup>.

Carol Christ also, referring to Tennyson's portrayal of this type, gives a similar view, adding that

Tennyson's poetry ... also exhibits a pattern of feminine identification in its preoccupation with a figure frequently called the isolated maiden<sup>3</sup>.

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1. The Mill on The Floss (The Heritage of Literature Series edition, 1960), Bk.5,4:405. Corinne was a novel (published in 1807) by Mme de Staëll (1766-1817), the learned French writer of works on political history, literature and philosophy, as well as fiction.
  2. Calder, p.111.
  3. Carol Christ, "Victorian Masculinity and the Angel in the House", in A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women, ed. by Martha Vicinus (Bloomington & London, 1977), p.157. The expression "isolated maiden" seems, in fact, highly infrequent.

Though such women possibly hold more allure for modern readers, we see that they found little favour with Victorian readers except that they were increasingly a topic for fiction. It is, in fact, possible that they enjoyed their disapproval. For the Victorian reader who was brought up, according to Walter Houghton "to view women as objects of greatest respect and even awe," and "to consider nice women (like his sister and his mother, like his future bride) as creatures more like angels than human beings"<sup>1</sup>. An active woman was felt to be in danger of being an aggressive one; and, in fiction at least, an aggressive woman might suddenly appear with whip or gun, out to trap her victim, and hardly the ideal feminine companion!

This can clearly be seen in E.S. Dallas's comment on the role of women in literature, in The Gay Science:

And now when the influence of women is being poured into our literature, we expect to feel within it an evident access of refinement. We find the very opposite. The first object of the novelist is to get personages in whom we can be interested; the next is to put them in action. But when women are the chief characters, how are you to set them in motion? The life of women cannot well be described as a life of action. When women are thus put forward to lead the action of a plot, they must be urged into a false position. To get vigorous action they are described as rushing into crime, and doing masculine deeds. Thus they come forward in the worst light, and the novelist finds that to make an effect he has to give up his heroine to bigamy, to murder, to child-bearing by stealth in the Tyrol, and to all sorts of adventures which can only signify her fall. The very

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1. Houghton, pp.354-5.

prominence of the position which women occupy in recent fiction leads by a natural process to their appearing in a light which is not good. This is what is called sensation. It is not wrong to make a sensation; but if the novelist depends for sensation upon the action of a woman, the chances are that he will attain his end by unnatural means<sup>1</sup>.

Yet the Victorian reader was certainly interested in the dark heroine. Without her the comforting virtues of the true heroine might not have had the same attraction. Then, they were not unaware, that there are women to be admired and yet hardly to be brought into the home. Especially as the century advanced they became much more openly aware of this, certainly as revealed in fiction.

In this chapter, therefore, an attempt is made to study the characters of Rosa Dartle in Dickens's David Copperfield, Miss Gwilt in Collins's Armadale and Mrs Hurtle in Trollope's The Way We Live Now, as examples of this changing conception of the dark heroine. They are all passionate, aggressive and active women who undergo various misadventures in their quest for meaningful lives. What is particular about them is that though they cannot enjoy the comfort of their own homes, they are drawn with a certain increasing sympathy which, as we will see, nearer the end of the century, turned into admiration.

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1. E.S. Dallas, The Gay Science (London, 1866), II, 296-97. Dallas' own marriage was unfortunate: he chose to marry an actress, in spite of his preference for the domesticated wife. It is, perhaps, of some interest to note that an unpublished letter of Dallas to John Blackwood, reveals his dislike of women novelists, "Mrs Gore, Mulock and all that rubbish that Smith, Elder & Co. delight



From the early introduction of Rosa Dartle, we perceive that we are in the company of a character who is strikingly different not only from the other women in David Copperfield, but also from the other female characters in Dickens's novels. She is portrayed as "a slight figure, dark, and not agreeable to look at, but with some appearance of good looks too"(20:350). She has black hair and strange black eyes which reveal her passionate nature. Her thinness seems "to be the effect of some wasting fire within her, which found a vent in her gaunt eyes"(20:350). Though David finds himself unable to endure the "piercing look" of her eyes and "their hungry lustre"(29:491), he admits that "there was yet something feminine and alluring" even in her wickedness and aggressiveness which "was worthy of a cruel Princess in a Legend"(46:735).

In addition to her fiercely argumentative nature, Rosa Dartle is characterised by a scar on her face which alternates in shape and colour reflecting "her inner feelings"<sup>1</sup>. It is the most sensitive part of her face, and David notices that:

"When she turned pale, that mark altered first, and became a dull, lead-coloured

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to publish chiefly from the hands of women. From all that babble about the nursery, and all weary detail of pap & primers—good Lord deliver us." (22 June 1857, National Library of Scotland, Blackwood Papers, 4123). The remarks arose as a result of his anonymous review of the Life of Charlotte Brontë which Mrs Gaskell felt was abusive.

1. Harry Stone, Dickens and the Invisible World (London, 1980), p.238.

streak, lengthening out to its full extent, like a mark in invisible ink brought to the fire" .... When "for one moment, in a storm of rage", it starts "forth like the old writing on the wall"(20:353).

The scar is not the only distortion that Rosa suffers from. For, from the first time David sees her, he is able to recognize the cause of her emotional distortion: "I concluded in my own mind that she was about thirty years of age, and that she wished to be married"(20:350).

The story of Rosa's early life is told by Steerforth. She was a motherless distant relative of the family who, after the death of her father came to be a companion to Mrs Steerforth. Her physical deformity is the result of a wanton act of violence by Steerforth who, when a boy, threw a hammer at her. Yet, by paying some attention to this lonely girl, Steerforth has gained a strong hold over her. Her passionate nature and his great charm made her an easy victim for him. He has constantly taken advantage of her; we may presumably even say that he has apparently seduced her; and then, after a while, he turns his back on her and elopes with Emily.

Rosa Dartle's role in the novel has been the subject of argument among critics. While some tend to believe that she serves as a chorus of sarcastic comment on Steerforth's brutalities<sup>1</sup>, others like G.B. Needham, see her as an example of "the misery to which the undisciplined

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1. See J. Butt & K. Tillotson, Dickens at Work (London, 1963), p.138.

heart can doom itself and bring innocent victims"<sup>1</sup>.

She suffers from Steerforth's desertion but she can do nothing but suppress her passion. By the time we meet her, her repressed violent emotions have turned into hatred and aggression. David tells us:

No description I could give of her would do justice to my recollection of her, or to her entire deliverance of herself to her anger. I have seen passion in many forms, but I have never seen it in such a form as that (32:533).

Rosa turns into a hateful and aggressive figure who wants to pull down Peggotty's house and have Emily whipped. She suffers whenever her rival wins some joy or happiness, and exults at her humiliation. In her strange encounter with Emily, we find in her the characteristics of the stereotyped dark heroine who wants to destroy her rival. She tells Emily:

I am of a strange nature, perhaps, ... but I can't breathe freely in the air you breathe. I find it sticky. Therefore, I will have it purified of you (50:790).

Harry Stone relates Rosa's extraordinary hatred of Emily partly to the fact that "Emily has triumphantly succeeded where Rosa had weakly failed"<sup>2</sup>, and partly to her "raging self-hate"<sup>3</sup>. But what Harry Stone does not

1. Gwenddyn B. Needham, "The Undisciplined Heart of David Copperfield", in Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 9(1954-1955), 91.

2. Stone, p.242.

3. Stone, p.243.

Rosa  
say is that<sup>1</sup> is a hateful exaggeration of the jealousy to be found even in good women, like Minnie Joram. This is the reason—or a reason for her existence in the novel. There is a purpose behind the drawing of her character. That purpose is partly to show how Dickens sees almost every character as needing love, and as thwarted and distorted if unable to give it or receive it. The distortion takes various forms; but, simply enough, an inability to love turns to hate; an absence of love is likely to turn to jealousy; suppression, in this case very obviously, turns to an unnatural constraint. Yet even with Rosa Dartle, and as much as Miss Havisham, this is not altogether her fault. And her jealousy and hatred of Emily is only a stronger version of the same feeling which is held by Minnie Joram and half the women in Yarmouth for Emily.

Rosa is the lonely woman who falls an easy victim to a hypocrite and irresponsible lover who makes of her "a doll, a trifle for the occupation of an idle hour, to be dropped, and taken up, and trifled with, as the inconstant humour took him" (56:872). Though perhaps her love for Steerforth may be seen as a whim or a mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart<sup>1</sup>, it is more than this. Her object is her fulfilment. She says to Mrs Steerforth: "If I had been his wife, I

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1. G.B. Needham, p, 81.

could have been the slave of his caprice for love a year"(56:871).

But instead of love and marriage, which she desperately seeks, Rosa Dartle is scorned and deserted, with no outlet for her emotions and trapped in a life which offers her no opportunity for happiness or fulfilment. She is as G.K. Chesterton describes her, "the lonely woman in whom affection itself has stagnated into a sort of poison"<sup>1</sup>.

Through this character, Dickens exhibits the frustrated life of unmarried spinsters. Though she excites the reader's fascination and even alarm, we close the book with mixed feelings of sympathy and pity as we leave her, "a sharp, dark, withered woman"(64:947), doomed to wear out her desolate years in frustration and misery.

Miss Gwilt in Collins's Armada also illustrates Dallas's thesis, and the book in general can be taken as an example of a class of literature which grew up in the 1860s usurping in many respects " a portion of the preacher's office, playing no inconsiderable part in moulding the minds and forming the habits and tastes of its generation"<sup>2</sup>.

Though some critics of the period rejected this kind

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1. G.K, Chesterton, Charles Dickens (London, 1906), p.194.

2. [H.L. Mansel], "Sensation Novels", in Quarterly Review, 113(1863), 482

of novel as "a tale which aims at electrifying the nerves of the reader"<sup>1</sup>, and though they considered that:

all the higher features of the creative art would be a hindrance rather than a help to a work of this kind,<sup>2</sup>

they regretfully admit that it was this type of sensational novel that was winning the heart of the general reading public of the period<sup>3</sup>. This disparity in taste between the literary critics of the period and the reading public, can be clearly seen in the reception that some of Wilkie Collins's novels met.

Collins knew that he was not writing for the critics. His main concern was with the reading public, and those who are willing to read a story but innocent of any literary judgement. He makes that clear in his preface to the book where he differentiates between two classes of readers, "readers in general" and "readers in particular"; that is the public at large, and the professional critics. "His consolation for rough treatment on the part of the latter," as Norman Page writes, " was to maintain the Johnsonian principle that it is, in the long run, the approbation of the former that is alone worth having"<sup>4</sup>

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1. Quarterly Review, p.489.

2. Quarterly Review, p.486.

3. Quarterly Review, p.486.

4. Page, p.4.

He wanted to enjoy a wide and popular appeal, so he chose stories of

brisk narrative pace, intricate and ingenious plotting, and tremendous dramatic force. Such stories have always been popular, and no doubt will continue to be popular, for they answer a strong human desire<sup>1</sup>.

The success of his earlier book The Woman in White told him that the reading public had an appetite for sensation. As he was concerned to reach as much of that public, he set out on his next book Armada, a novel which was to be "condemned by the critics," but which "achieved a popular success"<sup>2</sup>.

His new heroine, Miss Gwilt, can be easily distinguished from the fictional heroine of the period. In her creation Collins concocted a mixture that keeps all the old elements and adds powerful new ingredients. She is evil, selfish and without conscience as well as being lively, vital and amusing as the representative of selfish ambition and sexual sophistication.

Her background is unrevealed or unknown, and the only source of information about her early life is the letter which the dying Allan Armadale leaves for his son and from which we know that she was an orphan "whom Miss Blenchard had taken romantic fancy to befriend, and

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1. Bradford A. Booth, "Wilkie Collins and the Art of Fiction", in Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 6(1951-1952), 132.

2. Page, p.4.

~~and~~ whom she had brought away with her from England to be trained as her maid"<sup>1</sup>. Apart from this reference, nothing is revealed; and her life is shrouded in obscurity until she makes her appearance in the book.

Miss Gwilt is introduced as an attractive young woman who wants to make "an excursion into society" to obtain money and social position. Her principal method of operation is to use her sexual attractiveness to gain what she wants. She makes many conquests and wins over a variety of men from the old foolish Bashwood to the careless young Allan Armadale and the sensitive Ozias Midwinter.

Her life is filled with deceit and intrigue and in opposition to her is the rather foolishly virtuous and powerless Miss Milroy. In setting out the conflict between these two characters, Collins makes full use of the contrast between the cunning aggressive woman of experience and the virtuous all-too-innocent ingénue. She plans to ruin her rival's happiness, and brake the relationship between her and Allan Armadale. Though she is at first prompted by a cool-blooded plan to drag Allan into her snare, we notice that her hatred and jealousy of her rival become a part of her motivation.

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1. Wilkie Collins, Armadale (New York, 1977), p.25. All further page references appear in the text within brackets.



In one of her secret letters she writes:

My pupil, Miss Milroy, comes next. She too is rosy and foolish; and, what is more, awkward and squat and freckled and ill-tempered and ill-dressed. No fear of her, though she hates me like poison, which is a great comfort, for I get rid of her out of lesson-time and walking-time .... No words can say how I feel for her poor piano. Half the musical girls in England ought to have their fingers chopped off, in the interests of society—and if I had my way, Miss Milroy's fingers should be executed first (Bk.3,11:251).

Though she is apparently thwarted at times, her strength is such that she still manages to be in control of her plan. She moves among different social classes and places and appears able to handle any situation she has to face with ease. In her cunning and villainy, Miss Gwilt is a female replica of Fosco in The Woman in White. While still twelve years of age she had taken part in a forgery, and it was her "wicked dexterity that removed the one serious obstacle left to the success of the fraud"(Bk.1,3:25). Later, with the help of a woman-confidante, and old procuress skilled in criminal concealments, she manages to steal "her way back to decent society and a reputable employment, by means of a false character"(Bk.4,4:303). With the support and encouragement of this confidante, she starts in new stage in her career of villainy:

Have you thought again of that other notion of yours of trying your hand on this lucky young gentleman, with nothing but your own good looks and your own quick wits to help you? .... In two words, Lydia, take the bull by the horns—and marry him!!! .... Only persuade him to make you Mrs Armadale, and you may set all after-discoveries at flat defiance. As long as he lives, you

can make your own terms with him; and, if he dies, the will entitles you, in spite of anything he can say or do—with children, or without them—to an income chargeable on his estate, of twelve hundred a year for life (Bk.3,1:137).

Miss Gwilt is conscious of the effects of her good looks, and she embarks on her new scheme trading on her sexual charm and physical beauty. No doubt, Collins realized that one element in sensationalism was a mild shock to virtue or prejudice. He had done little to exploit this in The Woman in White except through the character of Fosco, but now he grew bolder. It had already become apparent that saleable sensationalism demanded somewhat greater sexual explicitness and Armadale was his response to the demand of the market.

Miss Gwilt certainly has more sex appeal than is common for women in Victorian fiction:

Exercise had heightened the brilliancy of her complexion, and had quickened the rapid alterations of expression in her eyes—the delicious languor that stole over them when she was listening or thinking, the bright intelligence that flashed from them softly when she spoke. In the lightest word she said, in the least thing she did, there was something that gently solicited the heart of the man who sat with her. Perfectly modest in her manner, possessed to perfection of the graceful restraints and refinements of a lady, she had all the allurements that feast the eye, all the Siren-invitations that seduce the sense—a subtle suggestiveness in her silence, and a sexual sorcery in her smile (Bk.4, 7:337-38).

The dangerous sexual implications, the unusual link between "smile" and "sorcery", and the "Siren" image used to

describe the lurid sexual allurements of Miss Gwilt give to her character an aura of strangeness and evil which strengthens the sensational quality of the book. In addition to that, the description shows also the deceptive quality which makes her so dangerous. She is as changeable as a chameleon, a skilful actress who plays whatever role will help her to reach her goal. In one moment, she turns from a wild leopard into a tame cat, "the woman who tossed the spy's hat into the pool was gone. A timid, shrinking, interesting creature filled the fair skin and trembled on the symmetrical limbs of Miss Gwilt" (Bk.4,6:336). Her dexterity does not merely lie in forging a letter but in forging emotions and feeling. She toys with Midwinter and drags him into a marriage which is for her just a further step to achieving her goal. She writes in her diary "I may personate the richly-provided widow of Allan Armadale of Thorpe-Ambrose, if I can count on Allan Armadale's death in a given time" (Bk.4,10:393), and then she explains the plot she has planned which is going to be:

In three bold steps—only three! ... Let Midwinter marry me privately, under his real name—step the first! Let Armadale leave Thorpe-Ambrose a single man, and die in some distant place among strangers—step the second! .... Step the third, and last, is my appearance, after the announcement of Armadale's death has reached this neighbourhood, in the character of Armadale's widow, with the marriage certificate in my hand to prove my claim (Bk.4,10:393-4).

With iron nerves Miss Gwilt continues her plot of the murder, and her defeat at the end of the book (not unlike

Fosco's) is not administered by someone else so much as the result of an error.

Like the other aggressive women, Miss Gwilt fails to achieve happiness. While Rosa Dartle was doomed to a life of misery and frustration, Miss Gwilt chooses death voluntarily. In her note to Midwinter she writes:

I might, perhaps, have been that better woman myself, if I had not lived a miserable life before you met with me. It matters little now. The one atonement I can make for all the wrong I have done you is the atonement of my death. It is not hard for me to die, now I know you will live. Even my wickedness has one merit—it has not prospered. I have never been a happy woman (Bk.6,6:589).

Though there is enough proof of her wickedness and baseness, it is the sensational aspect of her character that made the book a success among the readers at large. John Reed comments on the change in the taste of the reading public saying "it was the outcast type, the rebel, the champion of the senses, who became more attractive"<sup>1</sup>.

Among contemporary critics, the book's unconventional topic provoked much critical hostility. One of the reviewers described the work as:

Overstepping the limits of decency, and revolting every human sentiment. This is what Armadale does. It gives us for its heroine a woman fouler than the refuse of the streets, who has lived to the ripe age of 35, and through the horrors of forgery,

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1. Reed, p.78.

murder, theft, bigamy, gaol and attempted suicide, without any trace being left on her beauty ... [This] is frankly told in a diary which, but for its unreality, would be simply loathsome, and which needs all the veneer of Mr Wilkie Collins's easy style and allusive sparkle to disguise its actual meaning<sup>1</sup>.

Norman Page writes that "not all, of course, were troubled by these anxieties" and he quotes the Saturday Review's comment that the real objection to Armadale "is not that Miss Gwilt is too sinful to be drawn. The question is whether it is worth while drawing her, and what the picture comes to when it is painted"<sup>2</sup>.

What is interesting here is that though Count Fosco in The Woman in White is not less of a criminal, the critics did not raise similar objections. The reason for this may be that Miss Gwilt reveals too much of herself and her secrets are all exposed in her diary and her letters to her confidante Mrs Oldershaw. While in the case of Fosco, he is never allowed to reveal himself in the same way. Yet it may have been simply that she was a woman, and critics felt it a violation of their accustomed idealism.

In The Way We Live Now, Trollope's portrayal of Mrs Hurtle, the passionate woman succeeds in arousing in his readers a mixed feeling of admiration and sympathy; and this is clearly a further development.

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1. Robinson, p.195.

2. Page, p.18.

Mrs Hurtle is introduced as an attractive "dark brunette,—with large round blue eyes, that could indeed be soft, but could also be very severe"(Bk.1,26:241)<sup>1</sup>. Though her fellow-travellers describe her at first sight as "the handsomest woman" they have ever seen, at the same time they notice that "there was a bit of the wild cat in her breeding"(Bk.1,38:355).

It is not clear what her past had been. She had been married, and the reader gains the impression that her husband had ill-treated and deserted her, after which she had obtained a divorce. In America she had met Paul Montague, and the two had become friends. Eventually he had promised to marry her, but he shows little anxiety to keep his word.

Mrs Hurtle entertains a genuine love for Paul whom she sees as her only resort and as a man who will restore her back to her true womanhood after her unhappy experience. Yet after his travelling to England, Paul falls in love with a girl of his own position and breaks his engagement to Mrs Hurtle in a letter which sweeps away all her hopes of love and marriage.

Trollope narrates the struggle which follows Paul's letter with great emotional intensity, and with wonderful

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1. Anthony Trollope, The Way We Live Now (Oxford, 1975). All the subsequent page references are given, in brackets, in the text.

insight into the woman's state of mind. Paul's decision has deprived her of her only solace and has destroyed<sup>e</sup> her hope of a meaningful life. She cries "Oh, God! what have I done that it should be my lot to meet man after man false and cruel as this!" (Bk.1,47:447). The shock of the discovery that the friend, whom she had grown to love and whom she would have followed to the end of the world, was about to cast her off, and coolly to marry someone else causes her to rebel. She turns into a hateful and aggressive woman. In her frenzy of despair she tells Paul:

My last word to you is, that you are—a liar. Now for the present you can go. Ten minutes since, had I had a weapon in my hand I should have shot another man (Bk.1,47:448).

Mrs Hurtle is obviously passionate, menacing, partly created by her society, and likely to use her whip. In response to Paul's jilting, she writes three letters: first a very feminine letter meekly forgiving him, then another telling him that she will horsewhip him on sight, saying " I will whip you till I have not a breath in my body" (Bk.2,51:4), finally she sends neither, but a note asking him to come to see her. The three letters represent the three possible ways by which she can respond to Paul, but she does not, in fact, take out her whip or gun.

The great thing about her, is that she has genuine feelings. She stands as an example of the woman who

devoted herself and her life to love in a society where there is so often no other bond between people but crude self-interest and callous cash-payment. Even among the characters of her own sex, she occupies a different place, and only by comparing her with the other female characters of The Way We Live Now that we can reach a correct understanding of Trollope's view of her.

Mrs Hurtle may seem to be one of the few characters who are not spoilt by the new values and who manage not to be caught by the webs of the new convention. She seeks love in a place which "has degraded personal dignity to the level of exchange value"<sup>1</sup>, and in a society whose only virtue is commercial enterprise, where the new values prevail and turn the whole society into a commercial wasteland filled with dishonesty and impotence, in which money supplants love and sincere feelings, not only among its members, but also between wife and husband. Emotions and feelings are measured against nothing but money, and marriage becomes an auction where women sell themselves to the highest bidder. Georgiana Longestaffe negotiates shamelessly about marrying an old Jew, who is old enough to be her father, for the sake of his money. The ideal of love is dead for her. We hear her tell her mother "who thinks about love nowadays? I don't know any one who loves any one else" (Bk.2,95:425). Georgiana Longestaffe,

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1. Polhemus, p.186.



moreover, is not the only woman caught in the web. Lady Carbury is another. She tries hard, for the sake of money, to palm off her degenerate son as a husband for Melmotte's daughter. Money, for Georgiana, Lady Carbury, and many other, is the single object of life. It is the new value which has superseded and swallowed up all the older ones.

If Georgiana and Lady Carbury are one side of the coin, Mrs Hurtle and few others like Marie Melmotte appear to be the other. Their emotions have not frozen and their hearts are still full of love. They show genuine feelings; they do not work out everything by calculation; they are contrasted, in this, with Georgiana Longestaffe and the rest. Trollope always has an artless, genuine, and sincere preference for love, even accompanied by the passion of Mrs Hurtle; and it rarely shows more clearly than in The Way We Live Now.

Like Rosa Dartle and Miss Gwilt, Mrs Hurtle fails to achieve happiness. She is disappointed in her quest for a meaningful life in a "niche in the world ... in which, free from harsh treatment, she could pour forth all the genuine kindness of her woman's nature" (Bk,1,47:448). Yet what is interesting in Trollope's treatment of her episode is in fact the sympathetic approach in which he portrays her. While Rosa Dartle's aggressive attack on Little Emily, and Miss Gwilt's plotting and bad nature may push them both outside the circle of our sympathy, Trollope's common-sense and skilful treatment of the

episode of Mrs Hurtle succeed in booking a place for her in the hearts of his readers and a great deal of their sympathy. Though she adores Paul and seems to hate any woman who may take him from her, we see that at the end she agrees to abandon her hopes and reliquish him, and even to receive her rival Hetta, the girl he is going to marry, in her own place. In her last meeting with Paul, she tells him:

I abased myself in the dust, as a woman is abased who has been treacherously ill-used, and knew that when she was sure that I was prostrate and hopeless she would be triumphant and contented (Bk.2, 97:443).

Whereas we may half accept Stone's view of Rosa Dartle's passion as having disfigured her and turned her into a devil, Trollope winds up his account of Mrs Hurtle by making us agree with his opinion and judgement of her as at least a good-natured woman.

## Conclusion

That the Victorian age was not all of a piece is evident, and it is clear that the broad generalizations which many contemporary critics tend to make about the age as a whole are not less damaging than the extreme interpretations that some of the present-day feminist writers tend to make of the social and moral conventions which governed the Victorians' attitudes towards women.

We equally claim the right to make reservations against these general statements and against the angelic and saintly image of the Victorian woman on grounds of our disapproval of the hazy view of the Victorian social life propagated by a number of other writers who have been attracted by the subject of the Victorians' sex-life and underworld pornography, and whose primary aim is surely entertainment. Each side has somewhat simplistically tried to show us the social and moral values of the Victorians from certain aspects, and in both cases, it is hard to accept that a case can be made out for an effective generalization.

In their writings about Victorian women, it seems that some of these commentators still imagine that their readers can think only in terms of stereotypes. They suppose that if the ideal woman was a sexless angel, then this must have been apparent in writing outside fiction like William Acton's medical treatise at that time, and one author is enough to sustain their wide generalizations.

Even in this, their "evidence" is often suspect. If Acton states something with which an author agrees then he is regarded as an acceptable witness, if he says something with which he disagrees, then he is seen as an example of Victorian prejudice. All the time, the conclusions have been predetermined by the present-day writer.

In addition to the suspect ideal image of the Victorian woman, we also find that their image of the woman who lapsed from chastity as a repulsive outcast and the woman who showed strong feeling or sexual desire as baffling and repellent, are also far from being acceptable.

The social ostracism and the image of the "outcast" which some of these critics try to perpetuate cannot be generalized as the attitude of Victorians in general. In fact, what these writers are doing is taking what they suppose to have been the assumptions and behaviour of one class, the middle class, as the moral truth of the entire society.

Their image of the "ostracised outcast" may stand as far as its treatment by early Victorian novelists is concerned, but to stamp the whole age with it is quite incapable of proof. For as we have seen, the treatment of this subject differed considerably throughout the century and there was a gradual change in society's attitude towards its fallen women. The "outcast" of the forties was looked at in the fifties as the repentant

"Magdalen" and there was great hope of her redemption, and while society wavered between forgiveness and reclamation, a decade later, she was forgiven and some return to normal life was made possible.

The image of the "passionate" woman also underwent a similar process of change from undeclared but felt sympathy to an overt fascination and a pronounced public feeling of sympathy and admiration.

It would be outside the scope of this thesis to go on to consider at all closely some of the novels of the eighties and nineties; but we can see, in further developments, how strong the general tendencies that we have spoken about must have been. As already suggested, Wilkie Collins, in certain respects, anticipates Hardy and his Tess, though he was unable to give any reasonable expression to his sympathies. Such a work as George Moore's Esther Waters (published two years after Tess) shows not simply that Moore's technique was realistically superior, but that forty-four years after David Copperfield it was possible for him to write in a different way, and possible for readers to respond to him. This itself, raises the question how far fiction really reflects the beliefs, behaviour and practices of its contemporary readers, and how far its characters' behaviour is largely conventional, or whether standards of actual behaviour are not themselves based on conventional understanding which may sometimes even depend for its force if not its effectiveness on the fact that

it runs contrary to what the majority of society "really" feel.

We all tend to agree that these images can not be taken as an innocent pictorial guide to reality or neutral mental shorthand which helps to suggest the outside world. They are a subjective process and in some respects they belong to art more than life. It is easy to be bewildered by a comparison between the idealisms of real life and its actualities, and the supposed stereotypes of the novel and the fictional characters which we accept as convincing. It is arguable, therefore, that the fiction of the period needs to be read more closely and consistently, and it should not be used to prove a thesis.

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